



This page: Jim Redgate in his Adelaide workshop.  
 Opposite page, from left: Bryan de Gruchy, the  
 'grandfather' of South Australian luthiery; and Steve Salvi.



# GUITAR HEROES

LEXUS MEETS THE SOUTH AUSTRALIAN LUTHIERS REDEFINING MASTER CRAFTSMANSHIP ON THE WORLD STAGE.

WORDS LACHLAN COLOUHOUN | PHOTOGRAPHY JOHN LAURIE

WORLD-CLASS GUITAR MAKING, SAYS JIM REDGATE, HAS A lot in common with making premium wine.

Redgate, a veteran guitar maker – or luthier, as the craft of making stringed instruments is known – says he was at Peter Lehmann's Barossa Valley winery recently when, during a conversation with one of the winemakers, he made the connection.

"You are dealing with largely organic components," he says. "And although you have an approach and experience, you don't know exactly how it is going to turn out; there is an element beyond your control. You have the ingredients, the knowledge and the intention to turn out





“EVERYTHING I DO IS TOTALLY BESPOKE; I DON'T WORK TO ANY MODEL.”  
- STEVE SALVI



something beautiful, and there is a good chance that you will, but you can never be sure exactly what it is you are making.”

Redgate, 45, has been a luthier for nearly 20 years and specialises in making classical guitars from his home workshop in the Adelaide suburb of Noarlunga. From there, he makes around 15 instruments a year and largely sells into the American market, where his guitars – which blend traditional timbers such as rosewood and mahogany with materials such as Nomex, used in aerospace – sell for A\$15,000 each.

His best-known Australian customers are Melbourne’s world-renowned Grigoryan brothers, Slava and Leonard, who both perform and record with his instruments.

Redgate, who plays in a surf band called GT Stringer in his spare time, is not the only luthier turning out world-class instruments in Adelaide. The city has developed into something of a centre for luthiers, not just for guitar makers but also home-based craftsmen turning out mandolins and banjos that are sold to some of the leading ‘roots’ musicians around the world.

It is also home to Bryan de Gruchy, the ‘grandfather’ of local luthiery who pioneered the local craft back in the late 1970s and has acted as an unofficial mentor for the newer generation.

Steve Salvi is a younger luthier who takes a more rock’n’roll approach, playing weekly in the house band at Adelaide’s most bohemian venue, the Grace Emily Hotel. Salvi, who custom builds stringed instruments – no matter how unusual – makes very different guitars to Redgate and de Gruchy but agrees that being a luthier is something of a ‘black art’. He also uses the word ‘organic’ to describe the end product.

Opposite page: Works in progress. This page, from left: Bryan de Gruchy and Jim Redgate work their magic.



“People like to have something that feels organic and grows,” he says. “The more you play the bespoke guitars we make, the more they have a life of their own. As you age, the instrument ages with you and there’s something indefinable with that relationship.”

Salvi is a passionate flag-bearer for the cause of individually handcrafted instruments, a sector of the music industry that has grown exponentially in Australia as the major brands, such as Gibson and Fender, have outsourced their manufacturing with the rise of globalisation.

Now 42, Salvi has done a long apprenticeship since playing his first live gigs as a teenager and building his first guitar at the age of 18. In his twenties, he worked in London’s guitar hub, Denmark Street, and repaired guitars owned by the likes of Eric Clapton, while playing as the house guitarist at the blues mecca, the 12 Bar Club, a few doors down from the shop.

Coming back to Adelaide, he resumed his career as a guitar repairer in a major dealership but quit to become a luthier, working at Jim Redgate and Bryan de Gruchy’s workshops for free and watching how it was done. Along the way, Salvi managed to persuade the Churchill Foundation to send him to America to study and spend time with some of the country’s best guitar makers.

“I did discussion groups where you sit and talk with some really high-end guitar makers for eight hours a day,” he said.

“It was excellent, and I came back inspired because what is happening with guitar making in that country is amazing. When I got home, I realised that I didn’t want to do anything else; this was my calling.”

A lucky break came when a friend bought a boarded-up shop and offered it to him to rent. Salvi hung out his shingle in the inner-Adelaide suburb of Thebarton about five years ago and he hasn’t looked back.



OUR WORLD

Guitar repairs and set-ups might be his bread and butter, but the making of individual instruments remains his passion and there is now a waiting list for his output. An instrument ordered today probably won’t be delivered for 18 months, but that does not deter a growing number of clients who are happy to wait for an original bespoke instrument handcrafted specifically for them.

“People want something that is special and unique, and which gives them a voice,” says Salvi. “If you are playing a guitar and you don’t like the tone, it’s like talking with a voice that you don’t like.”

“It’s nice to have something that is unique. It’s not big-headed or arrogant, it’s just human nature to have something nice that is yours.”

While he specialises in steel-stringed acoustic guitars, Salvi also makes unusual one-offs. He produced a radical eight-stringed hybrid ‘guitar-bass’ for solo artist Heather Frahn; an innovative ukulele for folk band Brillig, which caused a stir on the band’s recent European tour; and is creating an even more radical ‘harp-guitar’ for a client.

He also has a reputation for building pedal and lap steel guitars popular with country-music musicians. In his workshop is a guitar being made especially for a “big guy, who’ll strum really hard” and another for a girl who picks the strings with her fingers.

“Everything I do is totally bespoke; I don’t work to any model,” says Salvi. “But I think one of the reasons why people like my guitars is that because I am a dedicated guitarist and I perform all the time, I can pull out a guitar that works.”

Finishing an instrument, he says, is satisfying but also nerve-racking.

“Any feeling of success you have is tempered by apprehension of it not being good enough,” he says. “But what I do enjoy is when people come back for the set-up a year later to get the instrument adjusted. Then when I sit down and play it I think, ‘yes it’s worked, it’s blossomed.’”

The strong demand for bespoke guitars today is in contrast to when Bryan de Gruchy built his first guitar, back in 1976. In many ways the pioneer for local handcrafted guitar making, de Gruchy says his early years were a hard slog. Now aged 70, he says he has built around 550

guitars and, semi-retired, would make only a dozen instruments a year. De Gruchy guitars are played by popular artists Kasey Chambers and Tommy Emmanuel.

“When I first started building guitars you couldn’t give away an Australian-made instrument,” says de Gruchy.

“There was a scarcity of builders around and one of my objectives was to have Australian-made instruments that were so good that people would buy them out of preference.”

The basis for any good guitar, says de Gruchy, is the wood. If you don’t have that, there’s no point in trying for quality. As a result, his shed is stacked with a huge amount of imported timber: Indian and Brazilian rosewood, mahogany and spruce. The only quality Australian wood for

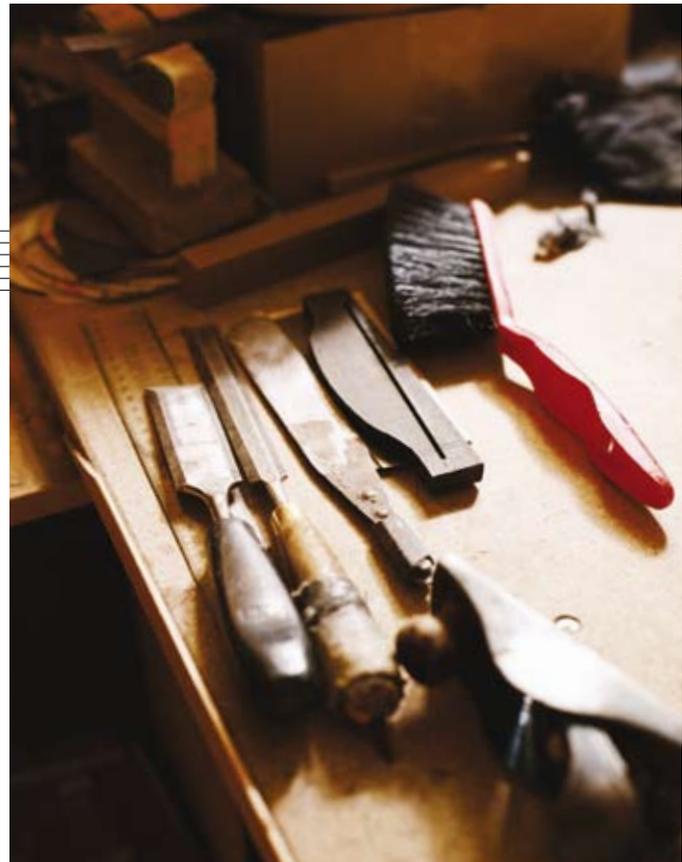
is better than anything you have done before then that becomes the benchmark, and you have to go for something even better again.”

Redgate is unusual in that while he builds traditional classical guitars he experiments with modern technology to improve them. The Nomex compound he uses, a derivative of Kevlar, is used in the aerospace industry, for lightweight motorcycle fairings and in cars and yachts.

“Probably what I am best known for is taking some of these newer materials and producing a sound which is very much like a traditional guitar with more volume,” he says. “I’ve built some double-topped guitars with Nomex, which essentially creates a sandwich effect with two thin pieces and the Nomex in the middle, and this has been very successful in delivering both a loud and a warm sound.”



Left: Steve Salvi adds the personal touch to one of his guitars. Below: Tools of the trade.



instrument making, he says, is blackwood; and while that is a quality wood, it is very hard to work with.

“I’ve been a bit of a wood freak all my life,” says de Gruchy. “I love tapping different pieces of wood and getting different sounds out of it.”

The satisfaction in making the instrument, he says, is to see top artists play them in concert. One of the “biggest buzzes” of his career was to buy a Tommy Emmanuel CD and hear his instrument being played.

For Redgate, seeing and hearing his instruments being played by excellent musicians is also the pay-off. But Redgate confesses that he is not as interested in the guitars he has already made “as the one I am about to build”.

“I love to finish one guitar and get it off and then start working on the next one,” he says. “If it’s a great instrument I either want to re-create it or build an even better one, because once you build something that

His most radical instrument was a guitar with a ‘wave of distortion’ running through it, a feature designed to add strength without adding weight. The guitar has a slight but crucial curve which runs from the neck to the bridge, making it quite unlike a conventional instrument.

“It was just an initial prototype, but Slava Grigoryan saw it and really loved it and that is his main guitar now,” says Redgate.

“Classical instruments are usually quite conservative and players don’t take too easily to radical changes in design. So it was interesting and gratifying that this was probably the most radical guitar I’ve built, and it has ended up with a virtuoso like Slava Grigoryan.”