

Daniel Slaman Guitars Revisited

By Aad Overeem

As published in Just Jazz Guitar magazine, May 2008 issue

Nine years ago I interviewed Dutch luthier Daniel Slaman for Just Jazz Guitar (issue nr. 16, August 1998). At that time he had interesting ideas about archtop guitar construction, and many plans for the future, so I was really curious to find out what he had been up to this past nine years. Every now and then we met at Guitar Shows and Daniel usually had some new and exciting instrument to play. I met Daniel in a now bigger workshop in the same building, in the city of The Hague in The Netherlands.

AO: Daniël, good to see you again, I see some surprising guitars in the workshop.

DS: Thanks Aad, welcome to the shop, can't believe that it is nine years ago when we did the JIG interview, time flies when you are having fun! Much water has passed under the bridge. And what a good thing that Just Jazz Guitar is still here nine years later!

AO: Tell me, I remember you had plans to make a prototype 16 inch non-cutaway acoustic archtop, inspired by the first Loyd Loar L5 archtops. How did that come out?

DS: Yes, I did make that guitar, and it has become one of my best selling instruments. All guitars of this model were commissioned by American players such as the late Dudley Hill, guitarist with Pearl Django. They are extremely loud and aggressive rhythm guitars, yet capable of sweet solo playing and chord melody playing at the same time. Just an all acoustic, no compromise guitar. I guess this model was the start of what I now call the 'New Vintage' line of instruments; modelled on the famous archtops of the past, but not copies.



AO: So what would you say are the similarities and differences?

DS: Aad, you probably have played some vintage guitars in your life that you remember, that had some magic about them in sound, looks and playability. That's what I am looking for, the sound and feel of an old well played archtop, but made today with modern insights. Many of the older guitars don't really play so well today, for example have a bulky neck compared to today's standards. Changing that is not an option because of the vintage value reduction. I can make a modern feeling neck on a New Vintage instrument. Also, players that have vintage instruments are afraid to take them on the road, because they can not be replaced. So that is where my New Vintage guitar comes into view.

AO: Did you study the vintage archtops in detail?

DS: Well, not in detail, but sometimes I see instruments for repair or at a guitar show, that inspire me to build a guitar like that. I played an ES-150 guitar once at a guitar show, and immediately thought 'I am going to build one like this.....!'. Then I looked for records of players that use the instrument, like Charlie Christian of course and Jimmy Raney, and talked to players that have played the instrument in the past.

AO: Tell me more, tell me more about the ES-150!

DS: Hey, Aad, I don't remember much archtop playing in 'Grease' ! Just kidding. The ES-150 is one of my favourite guitars to make, and has some special features. I started out looking for an original Charlie Christian pickup, the one with the big magnets, but without any luck because it is virtually impossible to find one.

Then with the help of the internet of course, I googled to Jason Lollar. He is a custom pickup maker in Vashon, WA (www.lollarguitars.com) and from the conversation I had with him he seemed to know what he is doing. The ES-150 is basically an amplified L-50, a basic Gibson guitar. It has a carved spruce top but not a carved back. The back is arched like on a steel string guitar, supported by cross braces. I had some Honduran rosewood in the workshop and constructed the guitar from that wood. I ordered a pickup from Jason, not one with big magnets but with smaller magnets. Nowadays magnets are stronger than in the thirties, so the smaller magnets are as strong as the original larger ones. I still wanted to use the three screw mounting method of the original pickup, so I constructed that out of metal with the help of a good friend /player.

Also I have constructed guitars with an English made pickup (www.ccpickups.co.uk), an exact replica of the original Gibson pickup in terms of magnets, steel, and wire. One of them has a black patina finish, the model is called Black Betty. It sounds really good, so there's the option for my customers to choose for this pickup as well. Both the Lollar and CC pickup use the same spacing of the three holes in the top for mounting the pickup, so the guitar can have either the Lollar or CC, while the option to change the pickup remains open.



AO: Doesn't the ES-150 have a fingerboard that is flat on the top, without the usual fingerboard extension that raises the fingerboard of the top?

DS: That's right, and it changes the neck angle to the body also. The neck is set in at a greater angle to the body, that's why the guitar feels so comfortable to play, it feels very natural to hold, more closer to the body. The original guitar had a V profile neck, and since this was a prototype guitar I decided to make a mahogany V neck. It was a very experimental guitar, with the 'flat' back, revised neck angle, and pickup I had never used before.

AO: Were you happy with the result?

DS: It was much better than I anticipated. Strong acoustic sound, and amazing amplified sound, with the notes clean yet warm and deep like Jason promised. He did a great job making the pickup; it's almost identical in sound to the English made pickup with the big magnets. I am a big fan of single coils anyway, but this one has a woodiness and warmth, yet clear top end that has to be heard rather than described. I have some sound samples of this guitar on my website. I showed it to Axel Hagen, a good friend and customer who once had a Gibson ES-150 that was stolen, it still makes him sad when reminded about that, and he was blown away by the guitar. Eventually it led him to commission a 17 inch ES-250 style guitar with the CC pickup, which is now his main guitar that he guards with his life (www.axelhagen.com) . Only about 70 Gibson ES-250 guitars are reported to have been made in the early forties, then World War II started and it was replaced by the ES-300 after the war.

AO: Interesting, does that guitar have a carved or 'flat' back? How does it compare to a guitar with a carved back?

DS: It has the 'flat' back, arched with the use of three cross braces like on the flattop guitar, and is made in maple with a European spruce top. In this type of guitar, a flat back helps to fight feedback, they are very feedback resistant probably because of the extra rigidity of the braced back compared to a 'free floating' carved back. Once you get to the point of cutting a hole in the top for the pickup, some acoustic power gets lost, although the guitar still has strong acoustics. With the pickup hole cut, it makes very little difference if you have carved back or arched, braced back. Also, it saves the customer some money because an arched braced back is much less laborious to make than a hard maple, tuned carved back. In an all acoustic guitar, the carved back is an absolute must to have the power and projection that an acoustic guitar needs.

AO: What is the aged looking ivory color ES-150 style guitar that I see over there?



DS: That's my 'White Face' model, carved spruce top, mahogany back and sides with an arched back, mahogany neck and Bois de Rose fingerboard. I was at a guitar show once where this guy showed me a 'White Face' Gibson mandolin. In the twenties the mandolin orchestra's were men and women in black on stage, with small black or dark sunburst mandolins that no one in the audience could really see. You know that Gibson has always had creative marketing thinkers, so they came up with the brilliant idea to make a white mandolin that would catch visual attention.

Eighty years later the white had transformed to an ivory patina color, with darker and yellowed spots, and a beautiful contrast to the mahogany back and sides. I fell in love with that mandolin on the spot, then had the brainwave to make an ES-150 style guitar with that same materials and look. What you see there is the prototype White Face guitar, which is not for sale, but I have just finished a commissioned one, which was my 200th guitar, and have two orders for White Face guitars in the order book. On the prototype White Face guitar, I used what I call a 'soft V' neck, it has a slight V shape feel to it but is not a hard V like on the prototype guitar, and not as clubby. Players find these necks extremely comfortable to play, along with an old style 10 inch radius fingerboard where 12 inch is used on many modern guitars. Both players that commissioned White Face guitars want the soft V neck.

AO: You mentioned Bois de Rose for the fingerboard, is that a rosewood?

DS: Yes, it is and it is fantastic for fingerboards. The botanical name is Dalbergia Maritima, it grows in Africa. I think the fingerboard material is important for sound production, it can colour the sound of the guitar. I use ebony also, which is a good choice. In rosewood, I used Brazilian, as was used in the old guitars. Great looks and sound, unfortunately Brazilian rosewood is an endangered species and difficult to find in good quality. I was never satisfied with other rosewoods like Indian, until I found Bois de Rose.

It has just the right sound, and very important, looks and feels like an old, oil and grime impregnated rosewood board after a few months of playing. It darkens by itself to almost black and really adds to the vintage feel and look of the instrument. From a production point of view, I can get good quality wood in sufficient quantity.

AO: You are probably the only maker producing guitars with the Christian style pickup and features.

DS: Yeah, I don't know of anyone else doing it. I find that many players are returning to the pure sound of the archtop guitar, unpolished but refined at the same time. Of course the humbucking pickup was an improvement in the sense of being more quiet than a single coil pickup, yet many players prefer the more direct and open sound of single coils like the D'Armond, P90 or Charlie Christian pickup. Kent Armstrong makes great floating pickups, I use these on my guitars.

AO: Wouldn't you prefer to make an all acoustic, carved back archtop over an amplified, more electric type of guitar?

DS: No, I enjoy both, it's nice to forget about the electrics and go for a great quality acoustic sound, but with the 'electrics', I still go for a good acoustic sound in terms of quality of sound, after all the electric sound is only as good as the acoustic sounds starts out, that's what the pickup sends to the amplifier. So the carving of the top is as important in an 'electric' guitar than in a pure acoustic one.

AO: It does give you the opportunity to get away from the traditional spruce top / maple back and sides combination.

DS: That's right, I have made an ES-150 style guitar with Spanish Cypress back and sides, with an all ivory finish on body and neck. This wood is used on flamenco guitars, I know it well because I have made many flamenco's in the past, and I think it will work extremely

great in this type of guitar. Also, I use rosewood, mahogany, pau ferro, lacewood, and could use koa or walnut or any other species that are promising in sound.

AO: So your focus is on the New Vintage instruments now.

DS: Yes, I have also built a 17 inch acoustic Stromberg model guitar for a customer in the USA. And the non-cutaway and cutaway L5 model guitar of course. But I don't exclusively focus on the New Vintage instruments. Recently, I have made a baritone prototype, the Blue Baritone guitar.

AO: How is it tuned?



DS: It is tuned to B, so you have B, E, A, D, Fis, B. I call it 'the six-string players 7-string' because you can play it like a normal 6-string guitar. The 7-string guitar seems to enjoy popularity in the States, but not so in Europe, so I figured it might make sense to try another approach to get to the low notes. It has the fanned frets of the Novax system; the low B is 27,5 inches, the high B is 25,5 inch. I have made it fan in a way that jazz players can still easily make stretched chords in the lower positions. That's where I think the usual baritone guitars fail, because they have a simple straight 27,5 inch scale which makes chord playing in the first positions extremely difficult.

The guitar is finished in a non-symmetrical blue burst, hence the name Blue Baritone. It has a floating Kent Armstrong single coil pickup. I like to build with new ideas, and then see what happens from there. Of all the prototypes I have built, after some time and exposure, orders came in. With the Blue Baritone, it might take a few weeks, it might take a few years, you never know, but I think that there are players out there that are interested in the concept. It's just a matter of time for me to find them or for them to find me. Sound samples are on my website.

AO: Does that guitar over there have nylon strings or am I only dreaming?

DS: So you're a Bangles fan as well, Aad ! No but seriously, you're wide awake and ready for the Archtop Nylon String Jazz Experience! For many years I wanted to make a nylon string archtop, but I never did because of the poor sound of any of the available piezo pickups. Who



needs a nylon string archtop that you can't amplify properly? And then finally, the RMC pickups (www.rmcpickup.com) were around; now is the time, the time is now! This was what I had been waiting for, the guitars sound incredible, I have sound tracks on my website. Very natural sound, deep, transparent, very even from string to string. The Acoustic Gold pickup is used with a Poly-Drive preamp, also made by RMC, which produces a perfectly balanced mono sound and because it has 6 individual piezo's it also has the unique ability to drive a polyphonic processor, guitar synth or MIDI converter. I use very lightweight western red cedar for the top, overall construction is much more lighter then in a steel string archtop.



RMC piezo in bridge

AO: Any more recent developments?

DS: Yes, a few years ago I made a guitar with a solid carved top and a laminated, arched back. It's called the DS-175 and DS-275, you can look at it as an upgrade ES-175 with a carved spruce top. And a pickup of course, I have used a humbucker mostly but also the Charlie Christian type pickup. One of these solid/laminated guitars, made for a customer in the USA, goes back to Howard Roberts' 'Black Guitar'. These guitars are a friendlier priced alternative to the all- carved instruments.



Dean Granros playing his Howard Roberts inspired Black Guitar

Just recently I have finished a very unusual, 18 inch archtop guitar for Axel Hagen with four (4) pickups; a P90, a single coil Fender style and a humbucker, and a piezo RMC bridge. His Slaman ES-250 is his main guitar, with the new one he wants to be ready for any amplified situation in session and recording work. I have carved the top in a way that it has no separate braces, the braces are carved out of the top wood itself. A real challenge! After seeing the Blue Baritone, Axel wanted this guitar in a blue-burst with Art Deco style appointments; hence it's called the Blue Deco. By now he has recorded with the new guitar on cd, more info about that can be found on his website, www.axelhagen.com.



Axel Hagen and Blue Deco guitar

AO: Talking of braces, I remember that you said in the interview that you had never made an x-braced guitar, always parallel braces. How are things now?

DS: Still haven't made an X-brace! I work with varying the thickness in the top, and can achieve any sound I want with parallel braces, so why change it. It works for me and for my customers.



AO: I noticed the camouflage guitar, do you get orders from the army now?

DS: Yes, all the time! No, not really, that one was inspired by my girlfriend Erika who loves army stuff although she's not an aggressive type at all ! In the Netherlands we have a society called 'Keep them rolling'. This Club has now some 1.400 members, whose goal it is to restore and keep in good shape military vehicles such as cars, armor, trucks, boats and planes from World War II. The name 'Keep Them Rolling' was a cry very often heard by the drivers of the trucks from the Allies in World War II. This to make sure supplies came to the frontline in a steady stream without the frontline troops being without food or fuel at any time. (www.ktr.nl, text in English also).

In 2005 they had their driving exhibition of army vehicles near Noordwijk, where I live. One of the vehicles had a sign 'Born for trouble' on the front, so I thought hey why not make a theme guitar with that name. I wanted it to have a basic 'army' feel so for the pickup there was only one choice; a P90, straight forward, built to last, no frills. It is made to perform well however, with a carved spruce top and carved maple back. The basis was the Jazz Junior model, a small archtop guitar with a big sound.



AO: Seems that you are in a very creative stage in your career.

DS: Yes, guitar making is a continuing horizon, there are always new ideas, new materials to try. Did I mention the Ice Age Jazz model? Ice Age Jazz is a guitar made entirely from Ancient Kauri wood. Ancient Kauri is the oldest Swamp Kauri found in New Zealand and is the oldest workable wood in the world. New Zealand native Kauri trees (*Agathis australis*) that fell thousands of years ago are known as Ancient Kauri. The trees have been buried and preserved underground in swamps for more than 45,000 years. You know how luthiers love old wood! This underground resting place, sealed from the air, became a perfectly balanced cocoon that preserved the giant trees.

I have selected lightweight quartersawn wood for the top, and the back is heavier flatsawn Kauri. The neck is three piece Kauri with an ebony fingerboard. The guitar has detail parts of mammoth ivory, handmade by myself; the inset in the tailpiece, bridge saddle, nut and truss rod cover, even the Slaman logo are all made in mammoth ivory, aged 10,000+ years old. To play a guitar with a history like that is like time travelling, it builds a connection to a time long gone by and you feel ancient sun rays and rain that feeds the giant Kauri trees, the majestic living mammoth; the miracle of life. The sound is noble and deep, pure jazz sound.



Just recently a customer came to me to make him a nylon string guitar, with a detachable neck to avoid the hassle on the flight to Istanbul that he takes 5 times a year, and in the colour blue inspired by the blue tiles of the Blue Mosque of Istanbul ! I made wood and blue turquoise rosette round the soundhole, and several inlaid rosettes in the spruce top. The sky is the limit! Also the archtop jazz guitar is not defined in a specific shape or format, like the violin, so experiments in both sound and aesthetics are a big challenge.

In 2008 I will hopefully celebrate my thirtieth year in guitarmaking with two special 30th Anniversary models, both made with walnut back and sides, bearclaw spruce tops and one of my favourite pickups, the P90. I am 50 years old now, and feel that I can create many more instruments for players that appreciate them.

AO: What would you say is special about your guitars?

Well, from what my customers tell me, the moment they have their Slaman guitar it becomes their favourite; the one they used to play doesn't get out of the case anymore. I like to think of each of my guitars of having a character and soul of it's own; I kind of look at them as 'old souls' because they play like old, well played in guitars right from the first notes.

AO: Thanks Daniel, I wish you continued success.

DS: Thank you for your time and interest, Aad, now let's look at the agenda's and pin point a date for our next interview nine years from now in 2016..... !



Daniel (left) and customer celebrating a new guitar

About the author

Aad Overeem was born August 4, 1941, and is now retired laboratory-coordinator at the Hogeschool van Utrecht (School of Higher Professional Education), department of Electronics/Telematics. He started at the age of 10 playing guitar and clarinet, and then studied clarinet formally. Aad played and recorded with Dixieland bands during the fifties, and later on added other single reed instruments and flute, then switched to more modern jazz forms. During the sixties, he played reed instruments and guitar professionally and recorded and worked as a studio musician doing workshops and clinics. He decided about 1970 to concentrate on a career as an electronics engineer, but was also a very busy part-time jazz player on various reed instruments and guitar, playing in small groups and big bands in Holland. He also worked as a composer/arranger. He did not play much guitar during the 70's, but around 1980 he became a guitar addict again and started collecting archtops and playing jazz guitar in small groups. Recently he plays guitar, reed instruments and flute in local jazz groups and big bands.

See and hear the guitars mentioned in the interview at www.slamanguitars.com
Links in the article: www.axelhagen.com , www.lollarguitars.com , www.ktr.nl ,
www.ccpickups.co.uk , www.rmcpickup.com