

# DREW ALLGOWER

**Black Majik from the Oval Soundhole.**

By Angie Neatby

HE ONCE BUILT MY OLD BAND A GUITAR OUT OF A SPLINTERED HOCKEY STICK. ELECTRIFIED THE FUCKING THING. I'LL NEVER FORGET THE DAY HE PRESENTED IT TO ME IN THE GLOOM OF HIS ABODE WHERE THE SHADES ARE ALWAYS DRAWN AND THE CATS CHILL LIKE MINIATURE LIONS ON MORPHINE BY HIS BLINKING COMPUTER. THIS IS DREW ALLGOWER. HE IS TO BASS CUSTOMIZING WHAT JAMES LANG IS TO GUITARS. HIS MUTTON CHOPS ARE HUGE, HIS VOICE IS VERY LOW...AND HIS "IMAGINARY BASS PLAYERS UNION" CAN HELP YOU FIND A BAND MEMBER IN TURKEY.

The "Allgower EUB"...the cartoonish upright bass that looks like it escaped from a Salvador Dali painting...the "superstar" of your custom stringed instrument designs. Can you describe this upright bass in just one sentence?

Like most things upright I can probably sum it up in just one word even... big.

What motivated you to make the statement: "...I felt acoustic bass guitars sorely needed more attention from bassists". When you began to work on custom designs, what part of bass culture

seemed lacking? Why was the 'acoustic realm so ignored'?

Bass guitars in general are relatively new instruments and were born in 1951 out of essentially a bastardized electric guitar... keyboards come from piano's, electric guitars come from acoustic guitars, but the bass guitar comes from a weird mishmash of electric guitars and acoustic upright basses. It just seemed so ass-backwards to me that the instruments evolution had skipped over an acoustic period entirely.

There were some pre-bass-guitar fretted upright basses, a few companies have made acoustic basses

with varying degrees of success over the years, but I think there is still a lot of room to develop acoustic bass guitars as an independent instrument beyond just being a big electric guitar.

I don't really see the acoustic bass ever replacing the standard electric bass, but in my mind, you can learn a lot as a player on acoustic instrument and get a better feel for what's really going on...the only tone control is in your hands, there are no effects or EQ to hide sloppy technique, and it's a dynamic like a living thing that breathes based around how you play it. I'm really amazed at how much more I'm playing personally now that I have an instrument that's ready to go at any given moment without have to find a cord, warm up the tubes, plug in the effects, set the eq, etc....

You've used everything from East Indian Rosewood to Sitka Spruce in your designs. Even mere mention of these exotic materials gets your tongue feeling velveteen. Why did you make these choices?

It really depends... in some cases like for necks and bracing it was for strength, top and back woods are largely tonal decisions, but I have to confess I'm a sucker for a nice chunk of exotic hardwood. I usually like to show clients the options out there and let the pretty wood do the selling. It really is a joy and to be able to work with some of these exotics from around the world, and it makes me sad to think that the days are numbered for a lot of those species....there are a few guitar supply houses that you can find reclaimed or FSC certified materials now, so it is an improving situation. Still, I'd recommend you go hug a tree.

Who was Orville? Why might Drew Allgower have a portrait of the man on his wall?

Orville Gibson is the "Gibson" in Gibson Guitars. I don't know what it is that gets me going about really early Gibsons... oval soundholes... big bottom bouts... harp guitars... oh baby!

I think it was just a really interesting point in guitar history when everything that is a standard today was just emerging. There were still some really different ideas about how to build a guitar, so some of his designs and approaches were pretty strange by today's standards. I suppose he was on my wall along with Edison and R2D2 for keeping up a pioneering spirit.

Did studying and working in Chelsea, Québec have influence on the type of customizer you've become today?

Taking Sergei de Jonge's course opened up acoustic instruments to me. If you look at an electric guitar, it's blocks of wood bolted and glued together, and looks pretty easy to figure out. Acoustics on the other just seemed like black magic to me.... all this thin bent wood held together under hundreds of pound of pressure with joints and glue and a few strips of spruce glued here and there. The course really helped de-mystify the process for me. As well, seeing all the variants of designs and materials really gave me a better sense that each guitar being built was going to be acoustically different, and that that difference wasn't a bad or good thing, it's just a 'not the same' thing.

What motivated you to set up "The Imaginary Bass Players Union"? What's it's purpose?

Well the IBPU was originally set up for usability testing of web navigation systems because I was doing web design work. People kept coming, and surfing through the bookmarks I'd used as fake content, so I eventually decided I'd let it grow and made a nice little directory of bass links with a list of 'imaginary members' and their contact information. I printed off some business cards so I'd have an excuse to talk to random bass players I met in the street or at gigs.... Now it's grown to a point beyond my control, hundreds of members from around the world, some notable names in the member list. For the past month of so it's been stripped to the bones again for a while I'm rebuilding it to be a little more interactive. The hope is that it will actually become a useful tool for people to connect with bass players with similar interests musically, to talk to other players about gear opinions, or to find a bassist for your band in say... Turkey.

Your workshops change location quite frequently. First on the Québec side and now there's talk of a central Ottawa location.

It must be a challenge to reloacte all those giant machines, tools and supplies...

Credit is due largely to my brother and his wife for gingerly packing up the Venosta shop contents, loading it up into the truck, and hauling here to my home-based shop. The tools are made to be pretty rugged, but the wood boxes were really scary to open. I'd still like to get the Venosta shop running again as a personal wood and parts supply shop that I could leave up to my brother to run. I really loved working up in the Gatineaus... they had smoke

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breaks from god up there, but it was proving impractical to get all the way out there and back every day, so a home based shop became the logical way to go.

When you're finished creating an individual piece, what do you hope it's fate might be? What sort of music might be best suited for play on your "Allgower" instruments?

I think a big part of what gets me excited about working in bass niches is the potential to really leave a mark on an instruments development, I guess I'd like to think that in a hundred years my basses will end up back on curious luthier's bench like Orville's guitars did on mine. It's my hope that new forms of instruments will help bassist themselves find new ways to play, and feedback from their discoveries will help shape what I'm building.

Where would an enthusiast go to learn more?

There is no shortage of luthurie info on the web, but a hands-on course from someone with experience is really invaluable, a lot of secrets can spill out over a coffee. I learned a lot from working on cheap instruments, and even today I like whipping up beater-guitars both for kicks and experimenting. It can be a little intimidating working on a guitar for the first time, but like so many things, the best way to learn is to learn is by doing.... probably destroying a perfectly good instrument or two along the way.

Check out: <http://bassunion.org/allgower/> for more info on Drew. **up**