

THE NOISE OF ART

Michael Spalt makes incredible art and builds killer guitars - at the same time. What Guitar? talks to the man behind LA's Totem Guitars

Words Dominic Hilton

That well-known wag, Oscar Wilde, left us an enduring quote that runs: "All art is quite useless." He could well be right but, then again, he never played a Totem Guitar, in which Michael Spalt fuses his dramatic montage sculptures with his high performance guitar designs to produce unique and beautiful instruments. Totem is a fitting name for these guitars that feature arrangements of intriguing found objects, discarded Americana and weathered materials, set into tops made of clear resin.

These mojo-filled mini-shrines are combined with crafted tonewood bodies, high quality necks and cutting edge hardware. The result is a custom guitar that plays and sounds like the best of them, without looking like anything you've ever played. The unusual combination of skills required to make these unorthodox guitars is explained by Michael's colourful background.

"I started out going for a career in film. I always had a strong interest in arts and crafts, and I started out studying painting at the Academy of Arts in Vienna after finishing my BA in San Francisco. I came to Los Angeles, originally, to work in the film industry, but then I'd always enjoyed fixing up guitars, modifying them, and putting them together from parts. I worked for a long time as a writer, writing screenplays, which is a very cerebral thing to do and I found that I needed something more tangible, more physical."



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Daunted by a difficult day of script writing ahead, Michael would clear his mind with a visit to his garage workshop, where he'd spend a while building guitars. That while grew longer and longer, until he had to admit that he was having much more fun guitar building than screen writing. "I eventually transitioned out of the film business into making guitars. Some of the [film] stuff that I did – building sets, special effects techniques and materials – seeped into the guitar making. And that all came together with my background in art when I began making the resin tops."

When you consider the quality and complexity of his instruments, it is amazing to realise that Michael is a self-taught luthier. His ear for great tone matches his



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'Before I built the art guitars, I built a lot of conventional guitars and basically tried out a lot of different things'

formidable technical abilities, a quality he was drawn to from the start.

Playing by ear

"As a teenager I played guitars and became obsessed with them, and I had always fiddled with the setup and things like that. I'm also a pretty voracious reader and I'd get whatever literature I could on the subject. I'm not a very good player because I don't have a musical memory, I can't remember a tune, so it was more the tone of the guitar that I was driven to and that's what I focused on."

"I had a Martin acoustic, which was the most amazing thing to have when you're 16, and I would sit for hours just tuning the damn thing and listening to it. The tone and, of course, the playability were the two things I wanted to incorporate in my guitars." When he began building his own guitars, Michael realised that

experimentation was the path to original designs.

"Before I built the art guitars, I built a lot of conventional guitars and basically tried out a lot of different things. The S&S line was one of the earliest ideas I developed as I always wanted the resonance of a hollowbody with the comfort and stability of a solidbody. I think I was one of the first people to completely carve out a body like that, leaving just a block under the bridge and round the neck pocket. It was also not just carved in a square manner – they have a very curvy chamber, like a violin, which determines how the sound travels through the body."

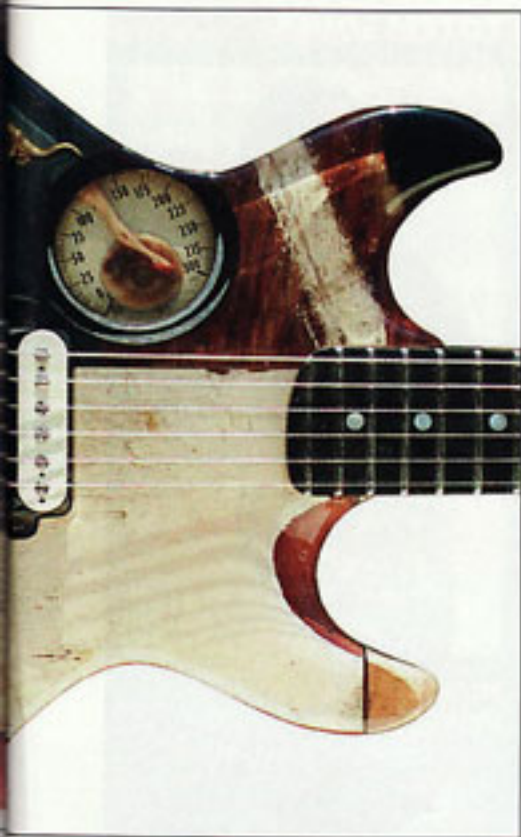
Raiding the junk drawer

As his guitar building skills evolved, the byproducts fed Michael's artwork and he wondered what he would do to close the circle... "Building solidbody guitars leaves you with lots of bits of beautiful



wood and I was making collages out of those. Then I was looking for something to unify that [idea]. To me the shape of the guitar is an archetypal shape and it kind of became a canvas. But to make a solidbody like that using lacquer would have required sanding down and leveling the surfaces, which would have lost a lot of the structure and colour. So, I started experimenting with the resin for that purpose and people really responded to it. When you see them in the flesh, the 3-D aspect really comes out."

In addition to bits of guitars finding themselves as part of new guitars, many other objects have found themselves frozen in the resin of a Totem guitar top. Flags, dolls, photographs, rubber snakes, picks, cogs, signage and even cuttlefish have become the



permanent decoration on these wild instruments.

"I had a drawer where I'd put things that I liked and little nick-knacks, but I never knew what the hell to do with it. I just liked them for what they were, sometimes they were materials like blocks of wood, sometimes objects, some broken... So, I began with this collection of things and then started looking for more stuff like that. I look for things that have a history, that have been used, like wood that has been painted and weathered. I got into old typeset made from wood - I made a few guitars from that."

Plastic fantastic

The unusual structure of Totem guitars begs two main questions: how are they made and what on earth do they sound like? The construction begins with a tonewood back, usually cut to an angular, Tele-esque Totem profile, onto which Michael arranges found objects.

"I work like a painter. I arrange things until they seem to fit and the theme becomes obvious. The names

seem to just suggest themselves after a while."

These objects are then cast into the top using clear resin, which hardens to produce a slab-top body for final routing and polishing. Sometimes, an additional 'tone bar' is required for added resonance and strength; Michael explains how they go together from the back up.

"I use some unconventional tonewoods and I've built solid guitars from cedar and redwood. I found I really loved the tone; it's very transparent and harmonic with a lot of airiness and overtones. At the same time, it responds quickly so you get a lot of bite. The problem with those woods is they're very soft, so I'd put in a piece of maple to connect the back to the neck and bridge; the assemblage goes around that block and the resin unifies the whole structure. The resin sits on the top of the guitar, going slightly over the edges to seal off the wood but, in 90% of the cases, the wood on the back is oiled. Partly to offset it, as the resin is too similar to lacquer in terms of appearance and it would clash."

It's easy to imagine folks being skeptical about tone when they're viewing a block of plastic filled with doll parts and combs. But this is art for tone's sake.

"I found that the resin is denser than the wood and tends to be a bit brighter sounding. I usually describe it as, if you put it on a mahogany back it will act like a maple top. It adds top end and some sustain because it's so dense. I tried several types of resins because I had separation problems as wood and resin contract at different rates - like the problems they have with phenolic fingerboards on wood necks.

"The resin I use retains a certain amount of flexibility, which allows it to work with the wood. The resin is also acoustically neutral and lets the sound of the wood through, so I can tailor the sound of the guitar."

UNDER THE INFLUENCE

Purple haze: Jimi Hendrix and the 70s scene inspire Totem's Mr Spalt



COMBINING SO MANY TECHNIQUES in the construction of his guitars, it comes as no surprise that Michael Spalt's musical influences are equally as diverse.

"In terms of musicianship, I'm kind of rooted in the early 70s and, for me, the ultimate player is still Jimi Hendrix. In a way, he discovered the electric guitar. In other terms, I have a connection with art from the 20s through the 40s, both Dada surrealist and some of the abstract expressionists. Joseph Cornell's

'boxes' were also an inspiration. Design-wise, there is a lot of stuff I really like that is anonymous, like American and Italian design in the early 40s up until the 70s. A lot of today's design is just rearranging those sources and mixing them up again. I also really admire people like [inventor, architect, engineer, mathematician, poet and cosmologist] Buckminster Fuller, who did so much and remained active, inventing things and pushing the envelope."

Stacking the Totem

Michael manufactures his own elegant metal backplates, which feature an integrated output jack, but the rest of the hardware is selected from new and vintage stock to suit each particular instrument. He expertly matches a body, neck, bridge and pickup to create a distinct 'personality' for each Totem guitar.

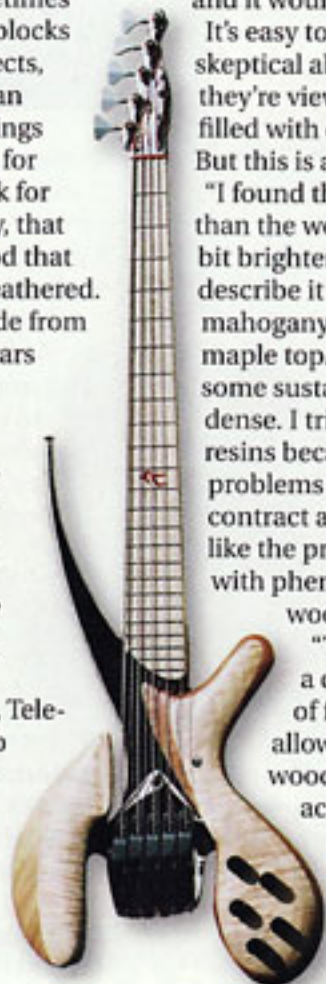
"On the more traditional S&S guitars, I generally use Hipshot stuff, which I find aesthetically pleasing and functionally solid, but with the Totem guitars it really depends on the single instrument. I have boxes full of old bridges and hardware, but that [kind of thing] is getting harder to find."

This blend of old and new parts is reflected in his use of many different pickups. Many of these are vintage (his favorites being old mini-humbuckers and P-90s), some are oddities like 40s Gibson lap steel pickups, and sometimes he uses modern models from

Seymour Duncan, Fralin and TV Jones. When it comes to DiMarzio, Michael sniffs out used early models, which he feels are as good as the Gibson PAFs. With the pickups selected, their position, fitting and wiring also benefit from the long-running Spalt experiments.

"If you look at classic single pickup guitars, like the Les Paul Junior, you'll find that the pickup is put in a harmonic sweet spot. With two-pickup guitars, the idea is to have the biggest difference [in sound] possible between the pickups, so they get pushed towards the bridge and neck.

"I like to put my pickups in the sweet spot and I'll often move the bridge pickup up [towards the neck] where there is increased string energy and the sound is less brittle. With the resin top, a pickup ring looks weird and, also, a direct mount pickup increases the attack and produces a tonal quality that I like."



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Often opting for a single pickup, Michael also likes to keep the wiring simple and effective.

"The single volume control is my own preference and I do some of them with a hard bypass that allows the pickup to be routed directly to the output jack. Sometimes that makes a major difference because even with the pot fully open, when you hit the bypass it can give you another 5% of power and opens up the top end. All pots will bleed some of the signal to ground and dampen the signal slightly, so the bypass gives you a cleaner, more up-front tone. The other thing with a push-pull bypass is that you can use it as a preset, which allows you to play at one volume then kick in the bypass for lead."

The final piece of each Totem puzzle is the neck, a labour-intensive component that Michael finds he is making more of.

"In the past I've had Warmoth and Musicraft build necks for me, but I've moved to make necks for



myself to have more control. As most of my guitars are built to order, I can build necks specifically for the customer. But – including the wood, hardware and time – I have to price my necks at \$350-\$400."

Please touch

To some prospective buyers, Totem guitars suffer from a personality crisis – do you play them, or just hang them on the wall and gaze at them as pieces of art?



"I've had people do family guitars, grandfather guitars, all sorts of themes. It gives you the ultimate personal guitar"

"People have a lot of trouble wrapping their mind around the fact that these guitars can play and sound like the best of them, while they have this weird appearance. I get frustrated when I do guitar shows and people will stop to look at the guitars but won't bother to plug them in, as if something that looks like that can't possibly be playable."

This problem drove Michael to develop a split personality – a talented luthier called Tom Temke,

an alias Michael once used to enable customers to believe that the artist responsible for the look of the guitars was working with a 'real' builder to produce their exceptional tone and feel. Thankfully, Tom Temke was retired as Totem guitars proved themselves in the hands, ears, as well as eyes, of numerous players. Players who enjoy the inimitable personality of their own Totem.

"I find that they are interesting as people and usually respond to one specific guitar. They like the idea as a whole, but they will buy one specific guitar and then they usually come back with their own stuff for the second one. I've had people do family guitars, grandfather guitars, all sorts of themes. It gives you the ultimate personal guitar."

Naturally, people wonder if this is something they could do



TOTEM SOULS



MICHAEL SPALT'S INSTRUMENTS are gaining recognition in the hands of professional performers, such as experimental electro-jazzer Woody Aplana (p/MENTUM Records). Using objects that were special to Woody and his wife, Michael built the feature-laden 'Empress' guitar. This Totem guitar features a vintage Gibson mini-humbucker, a vintage Bill Lawrence bridge humbucker, a Fernandes Sustainer, a Lace Sensor pickup behind the bridge, a Bigsby trem and finally, a Z-Vex Wah-Probe.

While Woody is happy to spread the word about his Totem, other stars are less dependable...

"I made a guitar for The Vines' Craig Nicholls because he played most of the record on the producer's guitar, which was one of mine, and he wanted one like that. So I made it for him, gave it to him, then he did an interview with *Guitar Player* magazine and he couldn't remember who made it. When he was asked if he was using his signature Strats, he said, 'No, I have this other guitar that's a lot better but I can't remember who made it...'. Jay-sus.

themselves but, like many crafts, it's about practice, not shortcuts and voodoo.

"I get a lot of requests from people asking me to tell them how I do this. It's not really a secret – it's more about experience, something that you need to try out. The technique is also very personal but, like a cake, the ingredients are pretty basic." **WG**

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PRICE: Bodies start at \$800
Guitars start at \$1,600