

He's got that thang for blues twang

Javůrek workshop produces 150 instruments yearly with authentic "Dobro" design

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The Javůrek file:

Occupation: luthier (maker of stringed instruments)

Age: 50

Company: Amistar guitars, founded in 1992

Famous clients: Keith Richards, Jeremy Spencer, Bon Jovi

Number of guitars made since 1997: 1,336

This guitar is the sound of the Mississippi Delta blues. Its brash metallic tone conjures up the atmosphere of a juke joint in Memphis, where the foundations for American popular music were laid.



KURT VINION/THE PRAGUE POST
František Javůrek shows off one of the metal-bodied resonator guitars crafted by his company Amistar for collectors and music aficionados.

In the heyday of the shiny, metal-bodied resonator guitar, blues musicians affectionately called it the "Dobro," after the Dopyera brothers, who invented the design in the 1920s.

Amistar, a small Czech maker of these rare beasts, celebrates its 10th anniversary of independent production this year. František Javůrek, 50, has been the driving force behind the company's success. A salesman at a wholesale business in Munich showed him a vintage 1928 National Tricone guitar in 1990, and Javůrek was captivated.

"They asked me if we could produce this kind of guitar here. And I immediately said — I'm crazy — we'll try this."

At that point in time, Javůrek was about to open the first commercial musical instrument store in Czechoslovakia. He had traveled to Munich to buy guitars for sale in his Allstar store on Wenceslas Square, but within a year decided to become the supplier of resonator guitars to German wholesaler Ami.

He didn't end up selling the guitars under his own brand name Amistar until 1997, after the two businesses parted ways.

"I started playing the piano when I was about 6, then I tried the trumpet, the guitar, the banjo, the mandolin and the contrabass," Javůrek says. "I have been a musician all my life, and that's why setting up a business in the music industry looked so attractive." He still takes up the four-string tenor guitar regularly, as part of a small band that plays swinging jazz tunes.

As it turned out, manufacturing a resonator guitar was not as easy an undertaking as country legend Johnny Cash suggested in his 1960 tribute song "When Papa played the Dobro."

Using a gallon-bucket lid as the guitar's resonator would definitely not stand up to expert criticism today. The project called for some creative reverse engineering.



Newly polished "Dobro" guitars are lined up for shipping to eager clients.

"It took a year, because I had to learn everything from scratch," Javůrek says. "We had to figure out that there is a special kind of brass that is also used for making trumpets, and the resonators are made out of a special variety of aluminum. It's a science."

Two brothers, John and Rudy Dopyera, invented the resonator guitar as we know it today. They were born the sons of a local miller in Dolná Krupá, a village in the Trnava region of Slovakia. John built his first violin at an early age. After the family emigrated to California in 1908, John became a master luthier. Then, in 1926, vaudeville performer George Beauchamp asked him to construct a guitar whose sound would be louder and have more bite, and therefore outshine the other instruments in the combo.

John Dopyera arranged three metal cones in a triangular pattern within a metal body, and joined them by a three-legged spider that supported the bridge. The basic design principle is similar to that of a loudspeaker, with the spider replacing the electro-magnetic driver. A later variation, also replicated by Amistar, used a single 9.5-inch cone that dramatically amplified the string vibrations. It had a less mellow sound, desired by some musicians, but increased the volume.

Made of metal

An unwitting benefit of the invention was that the guitar's body, or soundboard, no longer served as a resonator. Therefore it could be made of any kind of material, including brass and steel. Indeed, Adolph Rickenbacker, whose manufacturing company made metal bodies for the National String Instrument Corporation, founded by Beauchamp and the Dopyera brothers, moved on to produce one of the very first solid body electric guitars, known as the "Frying Pan," in 1932.

Today, a popular option is to fit Amistar resonator guitars with both electro-magnetic and piezo pickups, turning them in effect into semi-electric guitars. Pickups convert the strings' vibrations into an electric signal that can be amplified.

Papa George, a British blues vocalist and guitarist, uses an Amistar Tricone, for example. "The humbucker [pickup] provides a rich bottom-end sound. Add the blender control to bring in the bridge pickup and you have the top strings singing and the bottom end growling. This produces a rich, full-bodied sound, almost like a very mature glass of red wine."

Custom-built

Papa George's guitar was custom-made in Prague, but it receives a phenomenal amount of positive feedback from both musicians and audiences everywhere he travels.

"The first thing that strikes the eye is its unusual brass-bodied finish, which has been treated to give it a tarnished effect," the artist says.



A worker installs guitar frets by hand.

Annually, only about 150 guitars leave Javůrek's workshop in Prague-Modřany. The total count on the number of guitars made stands at 1,336. Assembly takes Javůrek and his two employees, Ladislav Snížek and Jan Liewald, two to three working days. In addition, Javůrek takes care of parts orders and accounting, his original field of study.

A graduate of the University of Economics in Prague, Javůrek managed finances at the Jewish Museum for two years, and then worked in foreign trade. Immediately after the Velvet Revolution, he offered his services as a consultant to Western companies trying to open Czech subsidiaries.

Today, his passion for guitars clearly supersedes his fervor for capitalism.

"We made a guitar for Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones," a proud Javůrek says. "Jon Bon Jovi plays on our guitar, as well."

Richards, who owns a collection of more than 1,000 guitars, requested a maple neck, and a copy of a historic 1930s guitar engraving with the addition of his famed trademark skull.

Not only have Javůrek's guitars been popular with rock stars, but they have also found acclaim halfway around the world, such as in Japan.

Tokio Uchida, who has a penchant for ragtime and blues, runs guitar courses at his own music school in Tokyo. His style of music points to the versatility of the resonator instrument.

"I use my [Amistar] Stager for bottleneck slide playing because its resophonic sound is matched to that type of music, although my friend Woody Mann uses his for regular fingerpicking," he says.

Uchida refers to the time-tested technique of sliding the neck of a wine bottle, a copper tube or even a knife against the strings, evoking a haunting sound.



Amistar's distinctive sound is sought by serious musicians around the world.

Although he values the authentic sound of vintage 1920s instruments, they are usually not in a condition to be used, says another blues musician from Slovakia.

"Fortunately, Amistar gave up mass production at the right time, and took the path to super quality," says Luboš Beňa, who put his Amistar guitar to the test in no other place than Memphis. It survived both the heat and the humidity, he reports.

"I always get the right 'Deep South sound,' which I love, and which is so typical of the Mississippi Delta."

So what comes next? Although John Dopyera is primarily known as the inventor of the resonator guitar, he always thought of himself as a violinist and violin luthier, according to his son.

"John Dopyera Jr came to visit our workshop [in 2001]," Javůrek says. "And he liked our guitars so much that he gave me the patent specifications. So here I have a detailed description how to make a metal-bodied resophonic violin. But the right time hasn't come yet."

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