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Documenting the Luthier's Art

By Bija Gutoff



A Pagelli guitar waits to come to life. Photo: Claudio Pagelli.

"The old luthiers know things," says Holger Obenaus. "Claudio Pagelli can tell you why it's important to get wood from a tree that was cut during a specific phase of the moon. Benno Streu can find the flaw in a guitar that doesn't sound right — he wipes his hand across it while playing a note and from the sound it makes he knows where to add or take away wood to fix it."

It's that arcane knowledge that Obenaus, a musician himself, is out to safeguard in his DVD series, "The Best Luthiers." "Our goal is to create an audio-visual encyclopedia to preserve the heritage of guitar making," says Obenaus. "We want to honor the great instruments that changed the sound of music and the gifted artisans who have elevated the craft of lutherie to an art form."

To create the documentaries, Obenaus and his team at Gourmet Guitars rely on their Macs, Logic Pro, and Final Cut Studio. "We are typical children of the new," Obenaus says happily. "Our music production facility and video editing suite have been all Apple for years, and we can't imagine using anything else."

"We want to honor the great instruments that changed the sound of music and the gifted artisans who have elevated the craft of lutherie to an art form."

The Wood Sings

"Nowadays, people don't learn how to do things by hand," says Obenaus. "They have a computerized router, which doesn't produce the same effect. Because you can't just say, 'Measure the wood to so many thousandths of

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DVD Info

"The Best Luthiers" DVDs may be ordered directly from the [Gourmet Guitars website](#); they are also available from [Stewart-MacDonald](#) and select guitar stores.

Project Credits

- Filming, editing and production: Holger Obenaus, Cindy Newman and Norbert Zucker
- DVD authoring: Daniel Ludwig, Ludwig Movie Design
- Web design: TMI Innovations, Inc.
- Packaging: Stefan Herzog, Herzog IDEX

Useful Links

- [Gourmet Guitars](#)
- [Pagelli Guitars](#)
- [Teuffel](#)
- [Fine Resophonic](#)
- [Walker Guitars](#)
- [Renaissance Guitars](#) (Rick Turner)
- [Monteleone Guitars](#)

an inch and it will be right.' You have to feel it. The old guys would tap on the wood to decide the exact thickness for a guitar. They know how it should sound. And they'll show you how, when it's right, the wood starts to sing."

Obenaus feels the urgency of capturing secrets like this. "The more computerized manufacturing jumps into guitarmaking, the less people rely on the old knowledge," he says. "The guys who did it all by hand are getting into their seventies and eighties, and we want to make sure what they know is not lost."

So it was a huge thrill for Obenaus to spend a week filming in the Següenza workshop of José Romanillos, who at 79 is one of the last big Spanish classical guitar makers. "He's a legend," says Obenaus respectfully. "And we got to shoot him as he finished making his last guitar."

Oldtime luthiers have been eager to participate in Obenaus's project. "They don't keep anything back," he says. "They tell us, 'I want people to remember what it took me 20 years to find out.' Many of them once dreamed of writing a book, but they can't afford to, or they don't have the time." That's why Obenaus decided to create his Gourmet Guitars DVD series.

European Songwriters

Obenaus and his two partners — Cindy Newman (his wife), who handles marketing and the DVD menus and covers, and Norbert Zucker, who helps with filming, subtitles, editing, and background music — have been successful songwriters, musicians, and producers in Europe. Over the past decade, their collective work has sold more than nine million albums.



The team at Gourmet Guitars who created the "The Best Luthiers" DVD series: (from left) Holger Obenaus, Cynthia Newman, Norbert Zucker. Photo: Gourmet Guitars.

"We wanted to try a new challenge," says Obenaus, who prepares the interviews, directs the videos, and does most of the editing. The series aims for nothing less, in his view, than preserving the very roots of American pop culture. "Without the guitar, pop music as we know it would not be the same," he says. "The guitar, both acoustic and electric, is the icon of American music."

All About the Music

The Gourmet Guitars crew hopes the series will appeal to a wide audience. "It's not only guitarmakers," says Obenaus, "but anyone who wants to know how it's done — or who just wants to be entertained by a good story."

Each DVD in the series profiles three outstanding luthiers, their master-grade instruments and the stars who play them — as well as lots of music. "In the end, it's all about the music," says Obenaus. The documentaries include clips from world-class musicians like Woody Mann, Louisiana Red, and Robbie McIntosh, who toured with Norah Jones.

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Rick Turner with the Turner Compass Rose Ukulele.

Focus on Rick Turner

Obenaus calls luthier Rick Turner "one of the most influential guitar makers of the last 30 years." Turner was responsible for crafting much of the Grateful Dead's signature sound; he built the lead and bass guitars Phil Lesh played and his company, Alembic, designed the Dead's recording studio and custom-built the super-clear sound systems for which Dead concerts became famous.

Other aficionados of the Turner sound include jazz player Stanley Clarke and Fleetwood Mac's Lindsey Buckingham, one of the first well-known musicians to choose a Rick Turner guitar. Buckingham played a Turner on "Rumours," which is still among the top 10 most successful albums of all time.

With these credentials, Turner was "at the very top of our wish list," says Obenaus. "We sent him the first DVD in our series and he was just blown away. He said, 'What you guys do is a very important thing for American music history and musical instrument history.'" Turner agreed to participate, and he's featured on the second DVD in the series.

"Logic gives me the tools I'm used to from a real professional recording studio."

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Tools of the Trade

Hardware

- Dual 2GHz [Power Mac G5](#)
- Dual 1.25GHz Power Mac G4
- 450MHz Power Mac G4
- Two 15-inch [PowerBook G4s](#)
- 10 [LaCie](#) 250GB hard drives
- 30-inch [Apple Cinema Display](#)
- 23-inch Apple Cinema Display
- [LG Flatron](#) widescreen cinema display
- [MOTU](#) Traveler interface
- [Marantz](#) hard disc recorder
- [Digidesign](#) Pro Tools Mix+ system
- [Apogee](#) AD-8000 interface
- Digidesign 888/24 interface
- Digidesign ADAT bridge
- Digidesign 16/2/2 interface

Software

- [Logic Pro 7](#)
- [Final Cut Studio](#)
- [Nattress](#) Film Effects
- [Spectrasonics](#) Stylus RMX
- Spectrasonics Atmosphere
- Spectrasonics Trilogy
- [Waves](#) Platinum Bundle
- Digidesign Pro Tools
- [Adobe Creative Suite](#)

Video Cameras

- Two [Panasonic](#) 100 videocams

Heading to Santa Cruz

From their studio in Cologne, Germany (the trio will soon move it to South Carolina), the partners packed up two dvcams, their PowerBook G4, microphones, lights, and hard disc recorders and flew to Santa Cruz, California, where Turner has his workshop.

There they set up to capture the craftsman at work. "We use two or three DV cams so we can shoot from different angles," explains Obenaus. "We hook up to Logic Pro on the PowerBook, using the digital converter MOTU Traveler as the audio interface, and we're able to simultaneously record up to six tracks of audio at 24-bit and up to 96KHz."

As a musician first and filmmaker second, Obenaus is understandably obsessed with sound quality. "It's the most important thing," he says. "If I have good sound and a less-good picture, I can always cut in some other image for the finished product. But if the sound is bad, you get a low-quality feel when you watch the DVD. Good sound with footage that's not crystal-clear is OK, but the opposite is not true."

Graphite, Ceramic, and Mama Bear

Obenaus and crew began by filming Turner's collection of guitars from the 1920s and 1930s. They then moved to his workshop, where Turner's ten-year-old son Elias volunteered to conduct the on-camera tour and give a demonstration of the machines. "We like to get a variety of visuals and locations and people," explains Obenaus, "so we don't have 45 minutes of just our main person talking."

Next they zeroed in on Turner's innovations. "He pushes to the utmost limits of technology," notes Obenaus. "He makes custom steel-string acoustic guitars that don't need to be amplified and a hybrid acoustic-electric that has the sound qualities of an acoustic guitar without the problems you get when amplifying acoustics on a big stage, such as feedback whine."

The DVD covers some of Turner's most creative advances: graphite reinforcements that allow acoustic guitars to be built lighter for a livelier sound, without sacrificing the strength needed to sustain high string tension; ceramic frets hard as sapphire that eliminate the hassle of frequent re-fretting; and a digital device called the Mama Bear that, according to Obenaus, "you plug into a cheap acoustic guitar and out comes the sound of a classic 1930s Martin."

Sound Logic

Logic Pro speeds Obenaus's editing process by making it easy to work with his key element, sound. "Logic gives me the tools I'm used to from a real professional recording studio," he says. He employs it on the road and in the studio. "After every recording session," he explains, "I hook up my Marantz to my PowerBook via FireWire; it shows up like an external hard drive. Then I just drag and drop the Logic sound files — it's very quick. Then as I'm traveling I can open up those sound files and start to cut and edit."

For Obenaus, the rough cut always starts with sound. "It's faster and easier for me to start with the sound than to be forwarding and rewinding video," he explains. "On the road I can cut and jump and pop in little pieces in Logic, check what I have, and be ready for the edit room. When I get back, I go through the soundtrack I recorded in Logic and cut it into snippets and label them by topic, so it's easy to find parts that relate to each other."

He edits the soundtrack into a rough overview of the entire interview. Next, he says, "I go through the entire thing on video. I transfer the tape to the



Master luthier John Monteleone, who will be featured in a future edition of "The Best Luthiers," examines a peghead veneer in his Islip, New York, workshop. Photo: John Monteleone.



Kim Walker, who will also be covered in the DVD series, in his shop in Connecticut. Photo: Kim Walker.

hard drive and make notes on which parts are visually outstanding. Then I match them up with the audio. With Logic, it's easy to sync the sound and the film."

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Holger Obenaus edits the soundtrack to a movie clip with Logic Pro. Photo: Gourmet Guitars.

Tricky Overdubs

Logic Pro makes it easy to edit his 24 tracks of interview, music, background effects, sounds, and various language translations. (His DVD includes English and German soundtracks and subtitles in English, German, and Japanese, which he created in DVD Studio Pro).

"I desperately need Logic to do the translation overdubs," says Obenaus. "I can automate the levels to bring down the luthier while the translator does the dub, then bring him back up at the end of the section. It's tricky, because you want to still faintly hear the luthier speaking. I could not do this without Logic. Remember," adds Obenaus, "we're talking about milliseconds of fading in and out, so the precision of the Logic automation is very important."

First-Time Director

"The Best Luthiers" represents Obenaus's first professional use of Final Cut Pro. "It's wonderful," he says, "because I can import two or three different camera angles, sync them, and add tracks — like still photos of the musicians the luthier references in his interview. Then I can jump back and forth to see which cuts, angles, or close-ups I want to use."

"What I really like is being able to jump between Final Cut Pro and Logic and Motion and Livetype."

Because he likes to experiment with content options, Obenaus appreciates Final Cut Pro's non-destructive editing. "I can try something and with one click I'm back to the original," he says. "This is very cool."

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Recording Studio

- [Soundcraft](#) TS24 40 channel mixing console with automation
- [Manley](#) SLAM
- Manley Vari-Mu stereo limiter compressor
- Manley Massive-Passive stereo EQ
- [Chiswick Reach](#) stereo valve compressor
- [Avalon](#) AD 2055 stereo equalizer
- Avalon AD 2022 stereo preamplifier
- [Empirical Labs](#) Distressor EL 8
- Empirical Labs EL 7 FATSO Jr
- [Summit Audio](#) DCL-200 Dual Compressor Limiter
- [UREI](#) 1178 Dual Peak Limiter
- [BSS](#) DPR-901 II dynamic equalizer
- [Lexicon](#) 300L
- Lexicon PCM 70
- [Eventide](#) H3000S
- [TC Electronic](#) M3000
- TC Electronic Fireworx
- TC Electronic Finalizer 96K
- TC Electronic TC 2290

Microphones

- [Brauner](#) VM1-Stereo
- [Neumann](#) KM 149 Tube
- Neumann KM 54
- Neumann KM 56
- Neumann KM 184 Stereo Set
- [Royer](#) SF-12 Stereo Ribbon
- [AKG](#) C 414 B-ULS
- AKG C 12 VR
- AKG C 417

He even calls Final Cut Pro's color correction tools "very musical." He explains: "I know we're talking about visuals, but it feels musical to me because the process is very similar to doing EQ in the recording studio. When you have a great piece of EQ gear, you just turn the knob and it sounds right — it's not distorted or strange. I love color editing with Final Cut Pro because it's like that — it immediately does what I want it to do, and I know I'll get results that please my eye."

Dancing and Wiggling

As an experienced Logic Pro user, Obenaus says, "there was a lot I just transferred from Logic" when he started with Final Cut Pro. "It's a great piece of software. It's so intuitively usable. Then Motion came out and I said, 'Let's see what it can do.' I just opened it up and tried something.

"What I really like," he continues, "is being able to jump between Final Cut Pro and Logic and Motion and Livetype. I can use Motion to create little tags that identify a speaker, and bring them into Final Cut Pro. Then I can compose some background music in Logic and import it to Final Cut Pro to see how it works with the video edit. I can create letters in Livetype and put them in Final Cut Pro to see how they dance and wiggle as I'm listening to the music and seeing the background."

Ultimately, it's about watching the movie take shape as he creates it. "I can see how it will all look together so I don't have to guess," says Obenaus. "And it's a lot of fun!"

Night Renders, Stunning Clips

Using Final Cut Studio allows Obenaus to save time during the day. "I can import things without a lot of rendering," he explains. "It's easy to do a lot of work in a little time, because I can watch it now and render it later that night. That's very helpful to me."

He uses iTunes and his iPod to review and share the work he's done in Logic Pro and Final Cut Pro. "I can export a Logic track to iTunes, put it on my iPod, and let someone check it out," he notes.

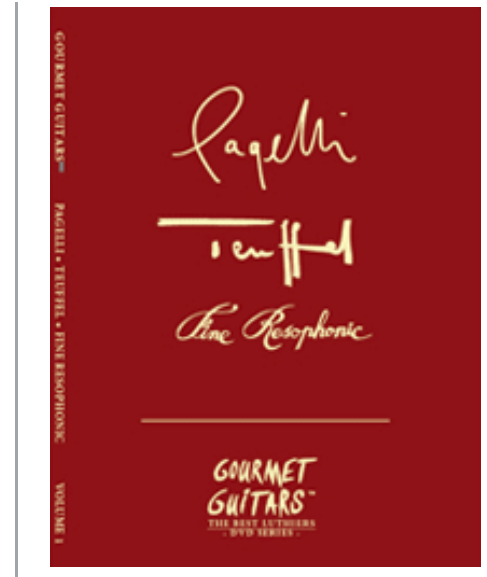
Now that he can even see the action, it's even better. "The whole iPod video thing is breathtaking," he says. "It doesn't pixelate — I can see every detail of my clips. I take it on the plane and show my work to musicians, luthiers, other filmmakers. It's super cool."

Obenaus is swept away by the image quality of the QuickTime codec. "QuickTime H.264 is absolutely stunning," says Obenaus. "I've never seen anything better for little streaming clips. We love that because we're putting lots of clips from our DVDs on our website."

Going Left, Going Right, Staying Real

"The most important thing about our DVD series is to document and preserve the knowledge these luthiers have and to show that there are different ways to solve each problems," says Obenaus. "You can go left or you can go right — and the variety makes it interesting."

Too, he says, "there's something about real handmade instruments that's so beautiful and so different from all the plastic, fast-food music that's out there. We want to show people that there are still craftsmen who build those instruments."



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