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The 2011 Woodstock Invitational

Acoustic Guitar reports from the New York State guitar festival.

By **Teja Gerken**

THERE ARE VARIOUS reasons that the last decade can rightfully be claimed as a golden era of custom guitar making. An ever-increasing level of craftsmanship, innovation, and tonal refinement has led to incredible pieces of functional art. But this elevation of the form has only been possible through the help of enablers and educators such as the suppliers of instrument-building materials; books, magazines, and websites that feature the instruments; and finally, the festivals that provide a venue for players to sample guitars, meet their builders, and socialize with like-minded aficionados. California's Healdsburg Guitar Festival is the grandfather of all contemporary luthier festivals with its emphasis on showcasing the work of acoustic guitar luthiers, and shows such as the Montreal Guitar Show and the now-defunct Newport Guitar Festival have helped build a community of builders, players, and fans of individually crafted guitars. The Woodstock Invitational Luthiers Showcase provides East Coasters with a similar experience.



The exhibitor area.
The exhibitor area.

Located in the upstate New York town of Woodstock (yes, *that* Woodstock!), the festival was held for the third time during the weekend of October 22–23. Featuring about 40 luthiers and several tonewood dealers, plus representatives from D'Addario and La Bella strings, Fishman amplification, the C.F. Martin and Co. custom shop, and a few accessory manufacturers, the Woodstock Invitational is less than half the size of some of the more established events. But in many ways, this compact format creates a more relaxed atmosphere conducive to sampling fine guitars. The festival, held in the beautiful Bearsville Theater and the adjoining Utopia Soundstage and



John Sebastian, Larry Campbell, and Happy Traum. Photo by Dan Gabel.
John Sebastian, Larry Campbell, and

Peterson House, is far less overwhelming than its larger relatives, but that doesn't mean that it doesn't afford an opportunity to rub elbows with star luthiers such as Linda Manzer, Michi Matsuda, John Monteleone, Bruce Petros, Bruce Sexauer, Ervin Somogyi, and others. And as this short list of names makes clear, the Woodstock Invitational is not just a regional show; builders travel to the event from throughout North America. Another fun and interesting exhibit at the festival featured some of collector Jeff Doctorow's instruments, including some unusual, rarely seen pieces, such as a Romanek 16-string, Fred Carlson harp guitar, and Steve Klein flattop.

Of course, any festival held in Woodstock has to include live music, and the Invitational is no exception. The weekend kicked off with a show at the local Colony Café featuring fingerstylists Peter Janson and Larry Pattis, the Frank Vignola/Vinny Raniolo duo, and Ugandan kora master Kinobe. During the day, mini-concerts by players such as Paul Asbell, Kinloch Nelson, Sharon Klein, and Doug Wamble demonstrated the instruments on display. And an all-star lineup of Larry Campbell, John Sebastian, Happy Traum, and Teresa Williams closed out the festivities. In addition, attendees who wanted to improve their guitar playing could choose from a half dozen hands-on workshops featuring a variety of topics and levels of difficulty.



Mandolin Brothers' Stan Jay (middle) is flanked by luthiers Steve Grimes (left), Linda Manzer, and John Monteleone. Mandolin Brothers' Stan Jay (middle) is flanked by luthiers Steve Grimes (left), Linda Manzer, and John Monteleone.

Overall, the 2011 Woodstock Invitational was a great event. Kudos to organizer (and *Acoustic Guitar* contributor) Baker Rorick, his staff, and all the exhibitors and musicians who made the festival almost as memorable as that famous one in 1969.



A table full of Bernie Lehmann instruments. A table full of Bernie Lehmann instruments.

Photos by Teja Gerken, unless otherwise indicated