

This page, the Chiquibul Forest in Belize, near the spot where the fabled Tree once grew. Right, a custom guitar crafted from the Tree's distinctive mahogany.

THE
LEGEND
OF

The MUSIC

Exotic lumber salvaged from a remote forest in



by ELLEN RUPPEL SHELL

photographs by GRANT HARDER
and TONY RATH

TREE

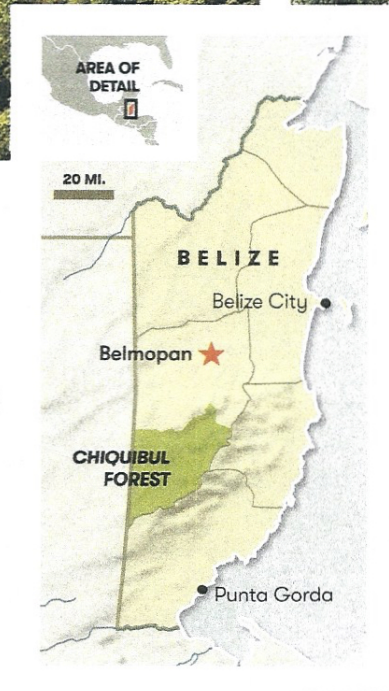
Belize is the world's most coveted tonewood

LEFT: TONY RATH; RIGHT: GRANT HARDER

The Chiquibul River, which flows through western Belize and into neighboring Guatemala.



NOT LONG AGO, while browsing a craft fair in Boothbay Harbor, Maine, I spotted a guitar like no other I'd ever seen. It hung half-hidden behind a display of cutting boards and wooden bowls in the booth of woodworker and luthier David Smith. Noting my hungry stare, Smith gently lifted the instrument from its perch and urged me to give it a try. I cradled it under my elbow and plucked a few chords. The sound was resonant and true. But the most remarkable part was the look of the thing: Its back and sides rippled like a full moon reflecting off a dead calm sea. Mesmerizing.



"What you're staring at is The Tree," Smith said, smiling. "It's the rarest and most coveted wood in the world."

Eager to learn more, I made an appointment to visit Smith at his studio. He and his wife, Nancy, live on ten wooded acres in Clinton, Maine, in a home they built by hand. Smith started woodworking when he was 15, lying about his age to score an apprenticeship, and returned to it after retiring from a corporate career. In 2009, he bought a kit to build a Martin guitar, and then he taught himself to make guitars from scratch. In

2019, while perusing an online catalog, he happened upon a photo of guitar "sets" made of wood from The Tree. (A set is the back and sides of a guitar.) "It was amazing to look at," he said. He bought one of the sets, built a guitar and sold it almost immediately. With the money he made from that sale, he bought three more sets and sold three more guitars. "One look at that wood," Smith told me, "and just about every guitar builder wants it."

So do guitar players. Saul "Slash" Hudson, best known as lead



A mahogany tree just outside Chiquibul National Park, an protected lands owned by the nonprofit group Programme for Belize.

MAP: GUILBERT GATES

guitarist of Guns N' Roses, owns more than 230 guitars, including priceless vintage models. Still, when he first tried a guitar made from The Tree, he was floored—the sound surpassed anything he'd heard before. "When I picked it up, I was completely humbled," Slash told a reporter in 2016, and confirmed recently through a personal email. "It was a shock-and-awe moment. It changed everything I'd ever thought about acoustic guitars."

Finger-style virtuoso Andy McKee, whose YouTube videos have racked up more than 59 million views, owns a Tree guitar, as does David Knopfler, co-founder with his brother Mark of the British rock band Dire Straits. But Slash, McKee and Knopfler are among the exceptions; very few musicians own a guitar made from The Tree. David Smith put it bluntly: "Not many musicians can afford them." The guitars range in price, but start around \$30,000.

Most luthiers who make guitars from The Tree custom-craft them for collectors. Tom Ribbecke, among the nation's most highly regarded luthiers, has built guitars for superstars, like Henry Olusegun Adeola Samuel, better known as Seal, but most of his clients are not famous rockers. Nearly two decades ago, at his home in Healdsburg, California, he received a visit from Paul Szmanda, a Wisconsin dentist who has a passion for guitars and owns dozens of them. Szmanda had driven 2,178 miles with an 8 feet 4 inches by 3 feet 6 inches board of The Tree in the bed of his Chevy pickup truck. "I looked at it and saw flames," Ribbecke said. "At that moment, my lifelong thing for this material was set. My first thought was, 'I've got to save this wood for the world, put it to its highest use.'"

British guitarist Michael Watts told me that luthiers and musicians alike have been known to cripple themselves with debt just to get a piece of The Tree. "I sold all 14 of my guitars to pay for one guitar made with The Tree, and I'd do it again," he said. "Basically, it's been part of my body for ten years. This guitar comes from a tree that had to fight all those years to survive, that had to push 100 feet through the forest canopy. That pretty much says it all, doesn't it?"



NOT QUITE. THE TALE OF THE TREE is shrouded in equal parts bravado and nostalgia. Few people know it, and those who do seem to have their own, very particular take. What is certain is that the story begins in 1965 deep in the Chiquibul jungle, a remote and largely uncharted broadleaf rainforest in what was then British Honduras and is now Belize. It was there that a clutch of vagabond loggers scouting for timber happened upon an ancient mahogany tree.

Mahogany had for centuries been that nation's primary export, and was a popular target of poachers and smugglers. Few large mahogany trees remained, and this one was enormous—12 feet in diameter at its base, soaring 100 feet into the canopy. If not the most massive tree in the forest, it was certainly a contender for the title.

Even more compelling was the rhythmic contortion of its bark, a steady spiraling that hinted at the "figures"—or three-dimensional patterns—lurking beneath its craggy surface. This was special timber, and almost certainly, quite valuable.

The loggers stood back to marvel at their find and size up the job ahead. Chain saws were scarce and rarely used at the time, as they tended to get stuck in the cold, hard heart of mahogany trees. So instead, the loggers set to work with handsaws and axes.

Their effort to bring the behemoth to its knees must have taken days, though no one alive seems to know precisely how many. What is known is that things did not go as planned. Rather than fall in the anticipated direction, the twisted tree fell backward and crashed down a ravine, ripping through the foliage on its descent. The loggers gazed aghast at the outsized stump poking through the mounded sawdust like a rotting bicuspid, while their overseers clambered down into the gorge to assess the damage.

Incredibly, the tree was intact, and seemingly unfazed by its tumble. Two Caterpillar D7 tractors were deployed to wrench it out of the muck, but the darn thing would not budge. Night fell and the howler monkeys screamed like a pack of tormented souls. The following morning, the loggers packed up camp and left. With time, memories of the fallen tree faded into myth.



SOME YEARS LATER, Robert Novak, a Miami-based importer of exotic woods, got wind of the story. Novak was an adventurer, the sort who raced sailboats in the Bahamas and mined for diamonds and sapphires in Madagascar. He had gone to Belize to buy rosewood, but upon hearing rumors of the fabled mahogany he decided to see for himself whether it was real. Novak, who became a citizen of Belize years ago, is unable to relate his memories due to illness. But John Roberson, retired owner of Belize Timber Ltd., was one of several close colleagues who kindly shared recollections. “Most folks back then thought The Tree was a myth,” Roberson told me. “But not Robert. He was never afraid to dream big.”

Novak was also a patient man. Recent tropical storms had left the jungle impassable, so he waited weeks—perhaps months—for the earth to dry before venturing out on his quest. The Chiquibul was renowned both for its wildlife—jaguars, keel-billed motmots and scarlet macaws—and for its vast variety of plant species, some found nowhere else on earth. There were few roads or trails or even paths to follow and scant potable water, but plenty of pit vipers and tarantulas. Tony Rath, a Belize-based photographer who has spent much time in the Chiquibul, said it once took him and a team three weeks to swath a five-mile path just wide enough for a tractor. “That



BYLINES

Veteran journalist and author **Ellen Ruppel Shell** is currently writing a book about the eels of Maine.

Vancouver-based **Grant Harder** previously photographed the capital of the Klondike gold rush for *Smithsonian*.

jungle is incredibly difficult to maneuver,” he said. “What Novak was trying to do, locate a specific tree, was just short of impossible.”

Facing this, Novak had every reason to turn back. After all, there were no eyewitness accounts of this once-in-a-lifetime tree, and he had seen no photos. Perhaps it was nothing more than a (very) tall tale.

But then, there it was: a Paul Bunyan-size log, wedged deep in a gully and covered in undergrowth. In an instant, Novak knew this tree was truly extraordinary. But he had no idea how to get it out of the jungle.

He returned to the United States to weigh his options. There were so many things that could go wrong in an operation of such magnitude that it seemed prudent to let sleeping trees lie. But he had never been one for caution, and as time passed, the fallen mahogany became his holy grail. “He simply could not let it go,” Roberson said.

After some years, Novak contacted the landowner to stake his claim. But by then, he was a bit too late: Two

BRENDAN MCCABE; PAUL VACHIER

other timber brokers had set their eyes on the prize, and at least one of them had more money than he did. He was outbid.

Months passed, maybe a year, yet Novak could not get that mahogany out of his mind. Then came a stroke of unthinkable luck: The winning bidder begged off the deal, deciding that the tree had spent too many years on the jungle floor to be of much use for his purposes. Novak stepped up with another offer, and the magnificent mahogany was his at last.



UNEARTHING THE LOG from its resting place of nearly 18 years proved a challenge, but one that Novak would not face alone. He'd enlisted a new partner, Tim Mahoney. Mahoney had spent years in Cuba, was fluent in Spanish and had a graduate degree in international relations. All that helped, of course. But more to the point, Mahoney knew wood. After graduate school he'd worked as a carpenter and spent weekends building a 41-foot cutter rig that he'd sailed around Central America. That journey had alerted him to the possibilities of exotic wood, and to its scarcity and potential profit-

◀ A feature in the September/October 1985 issue of *Fine Woodworking* magazine calls The Tree a "magnificent mutant" because its spectacular quilted grain pattern was believed to be the result of genetic defect.

Slash and his one-of-a-kind guitar. Its sides and back are from The Tree, while the face is 3,000-year-old Sitka spruce. ▼

ability in the U.S. After sailing home to California (apparently, with a load of Mexican timber on deck), Mahoney put his boat up as collateral on a loan to launch a lumber company, Handloggers Hardwoods Ltd.

Mahoney met Novak on a buying trip in Belize and together they cooked up a plan: Mahoney would help honcho the unearthing of the great log and collect half the spoils for his trouble.

Mahoney approached the task confident that he would succeed where others had failed. Rather than try to lift the log as it lay, he and his team boldly chain-sawed it into quarters, sliced the quarters into 15-foot-long lengths, and split the logs lengthwise. They then used a tractor to drag the pieces one by one out of the ravine to the nearest road, and trucked them 120 miles or so to the Belize River, where they floated the final distance to an ancient steam-powered sawmill, property of the Belize Estate and Produce Company—the only mill in the region that could handle a tree of that size.

The split logs were shuttled through the mill's 40-inch band saw, each carefully positioned to ensure the cleanest possible cut. The milling operation took 12 days and yielded nearly 12,000 board feet of prime lumber. (Each board foot is 12 inches long and wide by one inch thick.)

In photos, a youthful Novak beams while posing with freshly milled planks rippling with dark crenulations called "quilt." What made this tree's quilt unusual, maybe even unique, was that it showed three distinctive patterns: a blistered outline parallel to the grain that looked like a topographical map; a deeply curled figuring with trailing tendrils called "sausage"; and, rarest of all, a repeating "tortoise-shell" pattern. Some have theorized that these figures stemmed from a genetic mutation, and that's possible, but Boston University biologist Les Kaufman, an expert on tropical ecology, says the more likely cause is environmental stress compounded by age. This would make sense: The Chiquibul is regularly battered by foul weather, including hurricanes, and this tree had experienced plenty—experts put its age at 500 years.

Mahoney and Novak divvied up the milled lumber and shipped their shares to storerooms in Sausalito, California, and Miami, Florida, respectively. Word spread and furniture makers and woodworkers came calling. Mahoney's widow, Susan, recalls her husband selling the wood to a select few buyers from all over the world at an outrageous price.

Among these purchasers was the British entrepreneur Peter Lay. In 1984, Lay was in the process of building a magisterial estate in California when his interior designer alerted him





to the existence of The Tree. He went to see the wood himself at Mahoney's studio in Sausalito. "They had stacks of it, and it was so beautiful," Lay said. "It was ridiculously expensive—\$29 a board foot at a time when solid oak was selling for less than \$3 a board foot. It was magnificent." Lay purchased 1,100 board feet. "We had the front door built from it, and a bar, a couple of cabinets, and an entire English library. It's quite possible that I am the single largest user of The Tree in the world." (Possible, yes, but not certain: Several people told me that George Lucas had both his office and an elevator at his Skywalker Ranch lavishly paneled in the stuff, though I was unable to confirm that with the *Star Wars* director himself.)

On the East Coast, Novak, too, was swamped with seekers of The Tree, not all of them wealthy. Among these was Richard Heisey, a master furniture maker in Winchester, Virginia. Heisey was Novak's tempera-

▲ Forsland in his studio. His guitar designs include rare materials, elaborate inlays and, in one case, wood riddled with insect holes.

READ MORE
about Reuben Forsland's guitar-making process at [Smithsonianmag.com/luthier](https://www.smithsonianmag.com/luthier)

mental opposite, cautious and meticulous; he'd once devoted 900 hours to constructing a Hepplewhite-style breakfront of his own design embellished with bellflowers he'd carved from ivory piano keys. But like Novak, Heisey was a connoisseur of timber, a man who could look at a tree and immediately envision the elegant pieces he would carve from it.

After reading of the storied tree from Belize, Heisey hopped on a plane to Florida to see what all the fuss was about. He was not an impulsive man, but what he saw in Novak's showroom bewitched him. He borrowed money from his brother to purchase far more of the wood than he'd intended, painstakingly examining each plank and selecting the best. He piled his treasure into a rental trailer and trucked it home to rural Virginia. His widow, Nancy, still has the receipt: \$7,200, a tiny fraction of what the load would cost today, but an enormous investment (and leap of faith) at the time. "It cost more than half the amount I made teaching school that year," she told me. Nancy wasn't disturbed by the purchase or, for that matter, really surprised. "Richard had an eye for beautiful wood, and he wanted the best," she said.

Heisey found the quilted mahogany surprisingly challenging to work with. The figuring steered the blade, making it difficult to cut straight, and the wood was so dense—denser even than other mahogany—that it dulled his planer in minutes. He crafted a

few short boards of the wood into mirror frames for his wife and night tables for his brother but squirreled away the bulk with plans to one day shape it into works informed not by customer demand but by his own sensibility and inclinations. "He was an artist who expressed himself through wood," Nancy said. "He was saving it to build something special, something entirely his own."

Heisey fell ill before he was able to fulfill that wish. After his death in 2018, his son Jared discovered the mahogany motherlode stacked neatly on shelves in a corner of the family barn. Upon learning its value, Jared decided to honor his father by transforming a small amount of what by then was known as The Tree into a tribute. But what sort of tribute?

Jared is a guitar player, his dad played bass, and they both relished fine musical instruments. What better tribute, Jared thought, than to commission

an instrument built from the very wood his father had so lovingly kept safe all those years? And who better to build it than Reuben Forsland, the Canadian luthier who had crafted Slash's guitar?



ONE EARLY MORNING last October, I joined Forsland via Skype outside his home in the East Sooke hills on the southern tip of Vancouver Island, British Columbia. The air was saline with mist rising from the Sooke Basin, and the birds were chirping up a racket. A few deer peered out from behind a cluster of trees, looking less alarmed than curious. Through Forsland's laptop camera, I accompanied him for a short virtual stroll through groves of cedar and Douglas fir up a slope to the one-room tin-roofed studio he'd built a few years back. It was spotless, he told me, and fragrant with rosewood and spruce. Various machines of mysterious purpose sat poised awaiting Forsland's direction, and a vast array of chisels, planers, clamps and other tools were lined up neatly beneath floor-to-ceiling windows framing a stunning view. All this, he told me, was the culmination of a dream from which he had yet to awaken.

Forsland bought his first guitar at a garage sale at age 9, with money he made returning bottles he'd picked up along the road. He was never an accomplished player, and after working as a carpenter for over 15 years (and dating a cellist), he redirected his passion for playing instruments into making them. "A luthier in Alberta got me started, and then I kept at it, reading, asking a lot of questions," he said. Now he builds about eight guitars a year and has developed his own signature style.

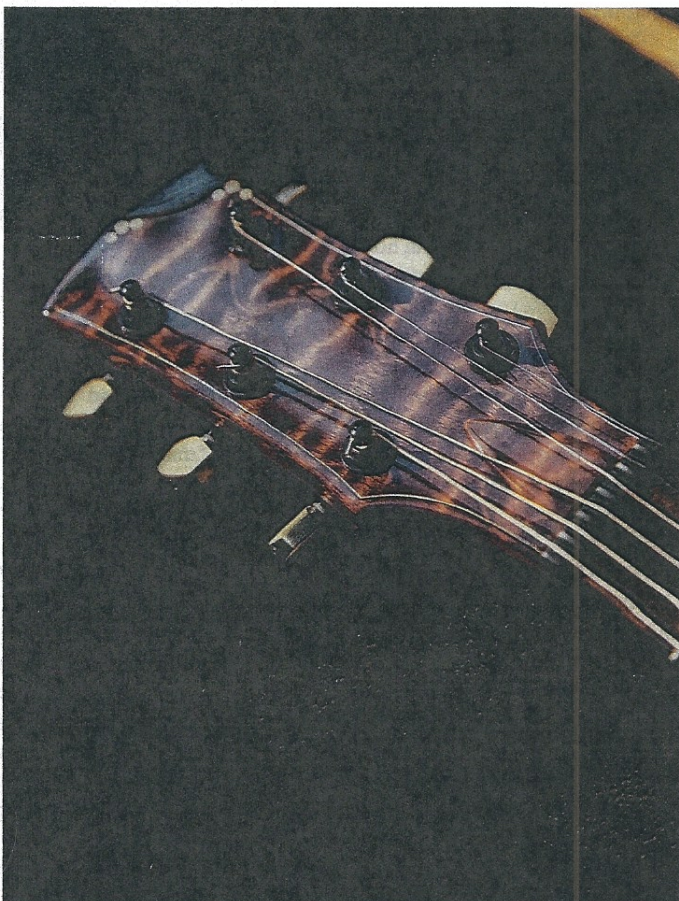
One of those signatures is his uncanny ability to engineer stories into the very bones of the instruments he builds. A few years ago, Forsland got permission to build a series of guitars with wood extracted from the childhood home of Jimi Hendrix. While this might have seemed to some like a mere publicity stunt, it was pure poetry to Forsland—a way for ordinary mortals (albeit mortals who can afford a \$25,000 custom-built guitar) to channel their inner rocker through a material touched by a genius of the genre.

The plank of wood Jared shipped to Forsland—eight feet long, two feet wide and one inch thick—arrived in disguise. The 2003 Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna had made it illegal to transport big-leaf mahogany as raw timber across national borders without a special permit. To avoid



THE LUTHIER AT WORK

Forsland builds a guitar to honor furniture maker Richard Heisey. Top row, he steam-bends mahogany from *The Tree*; installs tapered strips so he can glue the inside seams; and shaves wood from the back bracing. Bottom row, he shapes the neck; installs fret markers made from Heisey's radio antenna; the plate with the tuning pegs contains tubes with Heisey's ashes.



GRANT HARDER (6)

breaking the law, Jared instead sent Forsland a table—its legs were made of ordinary wood and its top was made from the Tree slab, and shipped the package marked as a table. (A number of actual tables made of The Tree have been disassembled and converted into tonewood for musical instruments.) As part of the agreement, Jared sent enough wood for Forsland to make a second guitar to do with what he pleased.

Now, Forsland had meticulously sawed, scraped, sanded and finished part of the precious plank into a guitar set for Jared. “How you cut the wood creates different kinds of figuring,” Forsland explained. “This sort of looks like the ocean floor, right? And after I finished it with polyethylene, this popped out. Do you see it, a man’s face?”

I did see it, but the face looked more like that of a wood sprite than a man, with a thick neck, a beak for a nose and flaring, Yoda-like ears. I asked Forsland what, if anything, that face forebode. He smiled cryptically and then showed me a small glass vial that held a pinch of Richard’s ashes. Weeks later, he would spend hours working those ashes into the rosette, the decorative inlay circling the guitar’s sound hole. He would also incorporate a bit of Richard’s favorite wood-working chisel and a short length of antenna from Richard’s radio.

“The chisel and radio antenna are things Richard might want represented in a woodworking piece in his memory,” Forsland said. “Knowing that the chisel was in his hand carving and shaping his works, and the antenna that connected him to the music he loved and also to the outside world. It’s such an honor to reintroduce all these facets of Richard’s woodworking life to each other.”

Forsland is inspired by the story of The Tree and aspires to work with the material for the rest of his life. Other luthiers I spoke with had similar feelings: Pennsylvania luthier Stuart Day described working with the mahogany as nothing short of a “magical experience, one of the biggest honors of my career.”



SUCH ENTHUSIASM raises an essential question: Does The Tree have any unique acoustical properties? Slash, McKee, Watts and other virtuoso musicians believe that it does, but even their expert views are highly subjective. Each had their guitars built by master luthiers, so is it the wood—or its treatment—that matters?

Like fine wine, tonewood comes from a living thing, and evaluating it is highly subjective. There’s a good deal of variation within any species, and few if any rigid rules. But it’s the top, or face, of the guitar that most determines its sound quality, and most luthiers use wood from The Tree only for the backs and sides. (Forsland is an exception—he’s experimented with using the sought-after mahogany for the face as well.)

Generally speaking, mahogany tops produce an earthy sound that some musicians like, especially for playing the blues. But most prefer the sound of top woods like spruce, which produces a full, clear tone, or cedar, which generates a tone that’s warmer and less crisp. Hawaiian koa is another favorite for guitar tops: It starts out bright and gets mellower and richer over time.

Basically, it’s a matter of trade-offs—no guitar is built to do it all. Still, I wondered whether guitars built from The Tree can do more than most. Or is it really the stunning appearance of the wood that so many musicians and collectors find so alluring, whether they realize it or not?

Chris Plack is in an excellent position to address that question. A professor of auditory neuroscience at Lancaster University in England, Plack is both an expert

on the intricacies of human hearing and an avid guitarist himself. He owns guitars whose backs and sides are made of Brazilian rosewood and other prized materials. “They are great guitars and beautiful objects, and silly expensive,” he told me. Still, it was not known whether instruments such as his were acoustically superior to those made of more mundane woods. Plack took it upon himself to find out.

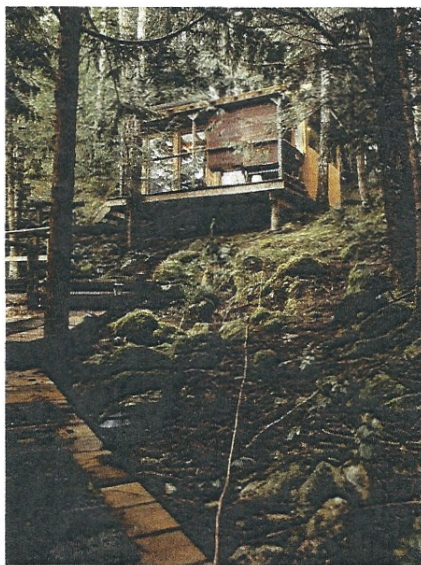
He and a colleague had six guitars built, varied only in the wood used for the backs and side panels. (The top faces did not vary.) One had backs and sides made of Brazilian rosewood, another was made of Indian rosewood, and the others were made of mahogany, maple, sapele and walnut.

The guitars were tested by 52 guitarists who sat in a dimly lit room wearing welder’s goggles. Plack was not surprised by the results. “Our conclusion was that the difference

between the guitars was insignificant,” he said. Not only did the guitars all have very similar ratings—in many cases, the expert musicians could not even distinguish one guitar from the other.

Given these findings, I asked Plack to explain why Slash and other top-notch musicians are convinced that exotic woods like that from The Tree produce an extraordinary sound. “Hearing depends on more than what enters the ear canal,” Plack said. He invoked the concept of “predictive coding,” which posits that perception, motor control, memory and other brain functions all depend on comparisons between ongoing actual experiences and the brain’s modeled expectations of reality.

Tests of other types of instruments have produced similar results. Antonio Stradivari, the 17th-century master violin maker, handpicked spruce trees from the Fiemme Valley in the Italian Alps, a forest so sought after by instrument makers that it is still known as *Il Bosco che Suona*, or the Musical Woods. Today, Stradivarius violins sell for tens of millions of dollars and are



Forsland’s woodworking studio, which he built with his brother. Before he started building guitars, he spent years building houses, bridges and even surfboards and skateboards.

coveted the world over. Yet, when ten renowned musicians tested Stradivarius violins against newly built models in 2014, most claimed that the new violins had a superior sound.

What this implies for guitars is that the very appearance and cost of guitars made from The Tree and other exotic and rare woods influence the way musicians and luthiers actually experience them. “Humans are not perfect instruments of analysis,” Plack said. “Perception is multidimensional. What we hear is greatly influenced by expectations and by other senses, especially sight.”

The beauty of The Tree’s wood is undoubtedly a factor in its popularity, says Steve McMinn, the owner of Pacific Rim Tonewoods (PRT). His company is the nation’s largest supplier of wood to the makers of musical instruments, a sprawling operation based near the North Cascades mountains in Concrete, Washington. The son of a forester who once worked as a logger, McMinn agrees that expensive, exotic hardwoods are no more likely to produce outstanding sounds than are more humble varieties. “When you get an extraordinary tree—say one with exceptional figuring—the sound matters less,” he told me. “It’s the appearance that interests us.”

The problem is that coveted woods like old-growth mahogany are finite, and demand greatly exceeds supply. Jay Howlett, an amateur guitarist who is the self-avowed “chief evangelist” of The Tree, devotes most of his waking hours to tracking down hidden stashes of the wood—in garages, barns and woodworking shops, of course, but also repurposed from tables and cabinets. The proud owner of two guitars made from The Tree, he has sourced it for guitar builders and buyers around the globe.

“I’ve found it for customers in China, South Korea, Japan, Singapore, Greece, Australia, France, England, Italy, and many other countries,” he told me. “I found Reuben the wood he used in the guitar for Slash. But I know of only 400, 600 board feet of the stuff left in the wild, enough to build at most 600 guitars. And when that’s gone, well, that’s the end of it.”



MAHOGANY WAS ONCE so plentiful in Belize that the tree is featured on the nation’s flag, a flag that also portrays two shirtless loggers, each holding the tools of his trade. This emblem offers some idea of how important mahogany once was to the people of Belize, and also hints at how the tree came under threat. The great mahogany trees of Belize are severely depleted, as are old-growth trees the world over, especially rosewood, ebony and Sitka spruce. In most countries, these species are now illegal to harvest, let alone export.

Most timber used for mass-produced furniture and building construction is grown quickly and relatively cheaply on plantations. But guitar wood is quartersawn—that is, sliced perpendicular to the tree’s growth rings to maximize sound wave projection. Because these slices must be wide enough to comprise the front, back or side of the instrument, they must be cut from large-diameter logs—generally from old-growth trees. These are the very trees from which the most highly prized guitars are built, and this is no trivial matter: The guitar is the world’s most popular musical instrument.

Most luthiers are wise to this and many strive to be mindful of the provenance of their raw materials. In 2011, Taylor Guitars, one of the world’s largest guitar makers, became the co-owners of a sustainable ebony company in Cameroon.

Taylor’s website now promises that all “fretboards, bridges and other ebony parts used on a guitar have been acquired legally and ethically, with a commitment to long-term sustainability.” Several other companies are working to develop tonewood from trees that are easier to grow and harvest sustainably, species like sapele, ovankol, bamboo, Canadian red wild cherry. Ever the innovator, Forsland has taken this one step further, using hemp wood bolstered with carbon fiber and Kevlar to build some of his bespoke guitars.

Steve McMinn has his own ideas about sourcing sustainable tonewood. Some years ago, he happened upon a downed bigleaf maple he described as “extraordinary,” its figuring nearly as elaborate as that found in the finest Honduras mahogany. He cut sprouts from the tree’s stump and attempted to grow those sprouts in tissue culture. “Maple is a weed.

It has a great desire to grow,” McMinn said. But not this maple. The experiment failed. So McMinn and his team sought out the best fiddleback maples they could find, took cuttings and sprouted them in baby-food jars. He then transferred the saplings to a 100-acre plot, which McMinn hopes will one day grow into the world’s first tonewood forest. “If you want wood for something specific—like building guitars—you have to grow it,” he said.

Still, as far as anyone knows, there is only one Tree, and those lucky enough to handle its timber take that privilege seriously. Forsland, who lives and works in the forest, sees himself not as the destroyer of an ancient living thing—others did that long ago—but as the steward of the storied mahogany. The Tree will live on through the beauty of the instruments he and others create, and the music made from them. “The Tree was on this earth for so many years, and it accumulated so much wisdom,” Forsland murmured like a prayer, as we admired Jared’s magnificent new guitar. “Our job is to keep that wisdom alive.” ♦



Forsland tries out the guitar he made to honor Heisey. He describes the sound as “full of warm, enveloping fundamentals, with an abundance of rich tonal textures, clarity and projection.”



One of Reuben
Forland's JOL
signature sound
guitars, with a
port that allows
the player to
hear the instru-
ment's sound
more directly.