

A HISTORY IN PLAYABLE ART: THE CABOOSE GUITAR BY TIM AND MARY MCKNIGHT

(Rodger Frantz conducted the following interview. He and his wife Kathy are the proud owners of 4 McKnight guitars and always attend the annual McJam get together, a guitar player weekend gathering held at the McKnight home and workshop.)

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Guitars and trains are rarely mentioned in the same conversation. Recently, I had a chance to discuss both with husband-and-wife luthier team, Tim and Mary McKnight.

RF: Tell me how the McKnight team works when planning and executing a new custom or theme guitar build?

MM: I am Mary McKnight, the aesthetic designer of McKnight Guitars. My husband Tim is the luthier. He does the real work. I can sketch out plans for a guitar in minutes. However, it takes him months to make my designs a reality. Being a husband-and-wife team since 1982, we are thankful for a vision to honor the abilities we have both been given. Our teamwork is 90/10. Tim does 90%, I do the easy 10%.

RF: Tim, can you briefly describe the shop operation and equipment used to accomplish Mary's designs?

TM: After Mary has completed her sketch(es) we both spend considerable time in our climate-controlled wood room selecting the woods for her design. I primarily choose the top along with the back and sides. Mary has a good deal of input selecting the woods for the aesthetic details such as the binding, purfling, rosette, peg head overlay, fretboard and bridge. She has a keen sense of design and is much better pairing colors that are eye appealing. It's my job to join the materials together so they sound exceptional. I do use some power tools but 80% of the build is all done with hand tools.

RF: Mary, can you tell us the story of how trains and guitar building converged to create the Caboose Guitar?

MM: The story begins with a red door, specifically a New York Central train caboose door. Let me describe the facts and timeline so it all comes together in the end.

In 2017, my Army veteran brother passed away. Being executor of his estate, I knew to disperse his things where he wanted them to go.

I was unaware that a set of swords hung on his bedroom wall until we cleaned out his home. I kept one sword as it has a knight

head displayed at the end of the ivory handle which resembled our McKnight Guitar logo.

While watching Antiques Roadshow one evening we saw a sword much like my brother's. I checked the sword which I had stored in my closet. It had the name Howard Kast engraved on the blade. I felt this sword needed to go to someone associated with that family name. I researched Ohio and surrounding states where I found the Hotel Kast, in Williamsport, PA. This was a great location since it was only two hours away from the April 2023 Artisan Guitar Show where we were to exhibit our guitars. I called and arranged to meet with the hotel's owner, Kevin Pequignot.

During several phone calls and texts, he explained he was aware of the Kast family and would like to see the sword. We could deliver it personally. He asked the price if I were to sell it. I assured him I would give it to him and know my brother would have been pleased it went to a proper home.

After the 2023 Artisan Guitar show, I called the Kast hotel of Williamsburg, PA to deliver the sword to the hotel/restaurant. In exchange Kevin asked me what I might like to make this a fair trade. I told him, "I would enjoy a tour of the historic building; I'm always looking for guitar ideas and wood... specifically old wood with history."

The Kast hotel is historic and was frequented years ago by train crews during their layovers in the Williamsport, PA area. During our tour we were shown a small-scale underground rail track which had been used during prohibition to move heavy kegs of liquor into hidden rooms beneath the hotel. We also saw an antique freight elevator shaft in the back of the hotel. I had eyed that, but Kevin let me know even though it no longer worked, he couldn't spare any wooden parts from it because of its historic significance to the hotel.

Kevin repeated, "Wood with history?... hmmm." He and his mom glanced at each other. She mentioned a red caboose door located in the back corner of the Hotel Kast's basement. They both smiled. I jumped at the chance to see it. Apparently, Kevin owned a Caboose door – who knew? It was previously displayed in a now-closed train museum and since nobody tossed it out, Kevin saved and stored the door. He asked if I would be interested in this item. I looked at Tim and asked if he thought we could create a guitar with a train theme using this door? I could see his interest was suddenly piqued.

I said to Kevin, "I'll take this door. It must be calling my name. The problem is that Tim and I are driving a Honda Civic and can't transport the door to our shop in Morral, Ohio." Kevin then offered to deliver it. I immediately accepted.

My great grandfather worked for the Erie railroad in Marion, Ohio so I had family connections and a soft spot for train history.



Prior to my mom's death she reminded me that all his personal railroad items be donated to our local train station museum so his family history could stay intact locally. It's a good thing we had donated those items prior. I might have been tempted to keep them for this project, but I did the right thing to honor my mom's final wishes.

While I was working as a volunteer in the local hospital emergency room I got a text from Tim, "The door is here! Kevin even attached the key." I smiled from ear to ear. That day I began telling patients who know about the McKnight Guitar shop why I seemed to be walking on air. That same day I sketched the initial guitar design. Our in-depth research of that caboose door began.

RF: Describe the caboose door condition when it arrived.

TM: The caboose door arrived as a faded red in color. Back in the day red paint was simply considered red paint. Today there are hundreds of red shades to deal with. Candy apple red, Fire engine red, brick red, cardinal red, chili pepper red. It was rough and weathered looking and you could certainly see the age in its crackled layers of paint.

MM: Our decision was to not use any paint in the design of this McKnight Caboose guitar. I told Tim I am picking Bloodwood as my choice for the caboose inlay. It is a natural red color – bold, strong and demands the eye's attention. I chose to have only a perspective view of the back of the caboose. The original door number inlay must match the number on the door we received. We have kept the top rail of the door, with its identifying number original and intact. I assumed that the guitar's purchaser will want that original painted top rail for his or her private train/guitar room. I have learned many people have train/guitar rooms.

RF: How did the caboose project affect you during the design and build?

MM: It seemed like everywhere we looked we began seeing items associated with trains such as a family reunion t-shirt and children's erasers. Tim and I attended the Ohio State Fair where there was a booth about train safety. We asked questions everywhere we went.

We researched the caboose's number, stenciled on the top of the door, to better understand the railroad system. I chose to design a tunnel entrance to view the back of the caboose in transit. While imagining the tunnel size compared to the size of the caboose, I was a bit "iffy." Was I making its perspective appear too snug? The guitar inlay theme, is all about bringing honor and attention to the door itself in which the guitar's back and sides are made from. I needed that door to be seen and not just heard as a guitar. I wanted the mountain tunnel scene to be more mundane so there is only an outline to create a vision of the boulders, the tunnel blocks and the grasses of unkept surroundings. They belong in the overall look but they definitely shouldn't detract from the subject matter of the caboose.

RF: Do you have a general strategy when planning and executing these specially themed guitar design projects?

TM: We strive to make McKnight theme guitars sing to your eyes before your ears ever hear them. I create the tone that inspires the player. I chose to pair the Poplar Caboose door back and sides with a vintage Redwood top.

The top came from the salvaged framework of a water tower that delivered water to steam locomotives in Oregon. The tower was dismantled in 1950 so the Redwood came from old growth trees that were hundreds of years old. We have used this wood on previous guitars, all with excellent results, so I knew this would be a plus sonically to the overall theme that we had imagined for the McKnight Caboose guitar. We toss ideas back and forth until we agree that Mary's initial design is on par with the final outcome.



RF: Tim, poplar wood is not a common tone wood for acoustic guitars. How "musical" was the caboose door's poplar?

TM: The door itself is constructed of American Poplar. Some call it "Rainbow Poplar" due to its interesting colors of gold, brown, green, red and yellow hues. After I dismantled the door, I had to literally grind away dozens of coats of red paint to reveal what the natural wood looked like below. After I had visually selected the pieces of wood that were the most defect free, I re-sawed the thick door parts into thinner wood suitable for back and sides. Being a luthier, I always tap test wood to get a sense of its unique musical quality and to my amazement, the wood had an amazing Q or low damping quality to its tone with a surprising amount of sustain. I knew instantly the wood had very high possibilities of making an exceptional sounding guitar, no matter how uncommon the wood was, in its use as a "tone wood".

RF: How did the planning progress?



TM: Though the back and sides are made of the original caboose door, there needed to be more emphasis on the train theme as a whole. We know the caboose isn't going anywhere by itself. The engine would be placed on the front of the guitar's peg head, just like it would be at the head of the train. The peg head's overlay is made of the door's poplar wood too, but the size and design of the engine was yet another research debate. What would the engine have looked like in the early 1900's time frame?

Based on the caboose's serial number (19805), we learned that it was built in New York Central's Oswego, NY train car manufacturing facility sometime between 1902 and 1923. 115 cars were built between those dates with serial numbers ranging from 19001 to 20082. At least this is what we believe to be true. Train admirers know facts far better than I, but in the long run I must admit I cheated since I am only required to make an eye-appealing guitar.

We debated the work and how much detail we might need to add and wondered how necessary it was to make this guitar historically correct visually.

RF: What guitar shape/size did you choose for the Caboose guitar?

TM: We chose our body shape, the Lowlander (elongated OOO – 14 Fret), which we both thought was most attractive and easier to handle for players. The Lowlander is slightly larger than an OM but not as large as a dreadnought. Its shape and size are versatile in that it can be played comfortably as a fingerstyle guitar yet has enough soundbox air volume and large vibrating

surfaces to authoritatively take the lead in any song circle or jam. It's the size that best fit and utilized the pieces of useable wood that we had to work with.

The Caboose guitar doesn't have an owner (as of this writing) so we hope it will be approvable in size as we cannot change the shape. We won't change anything on the guitar except the strings. We questioned our local train museum and even attended a model train convention. We made calls and sent emails to the NY, PA and Canada Southern Historical Societies to broaden our train knowledge, specifically about this caboose. One train enthusiast mentioned that in the long run this guitar is already made so those details won't matter to the average Joe. Not to mention that the majority of train enthusiasts are not out in the world investigating guitar designs of the Morral, Ohio McKnight duo.

RF: I know the Caboose Guitar serial number is 300. Is there any significance to that number?

TM: The number on the front of the engine, inlaid at the top of the peghead, is 300. We chose this because this commemorates our 300th guitar build. It is a gem that holds historical value for our company also.

RF: We see sound ports on many McKnight guitars. Why? And how was this one incorporated thematically?

TM: As many players age, which I'm not saying guitar players are old, but let's face it... it happens. None of us are getting any younger... the side sound port offers a sound source or monitor for the player who tends to stretch his or her neck over the front sound hole to listen to themselves play. This adds stress on their neck and back. The side sound port assists those who find their hearing has faded and they are not as enthused to play in the bathroom where the smaller room focuses on the listening pleasure. How many times do players hear impatient family members say, "Will you PLEASE get out of the bathroom?"

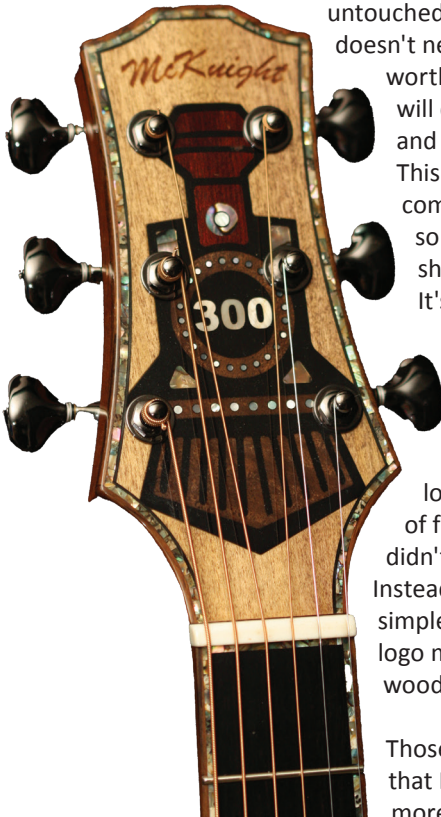
MM: The side sound port was a given. They are a popular option in nearly every guitar we build. Let's discuss the fact that trains are valuable to the everyday people all over the United States of America. Safety is a must.



In the early days, crossing gates were not prominent. Warnings and signage were minimal. Tim and I chose to have a side sound port depicting a RR crossing sign. This is a nod more towards today than in the early 1900s. It is made with lemon yellow Osage Orange wood from a local Ohio Amish family's tree. It was the perfect color. The side sound port has holes for a reason.

RF: What other design features were incorporated into the Caboose?

MM: It made sense to allow the blue abalone rosette to surround the sound hole as a lone untouched railroad circular spur. It doesn't need to announce its self-worth. The player's hands will direct the listener's eyes and ears in that direction. This rosette need not compete with the beautiful sound the player is able to share with the audience. It's just that simple.



As the fretboard is attached more toward the end of the build process, Tim looked through our supply of fret markers. The guitar didn't need any more bling. Instead, he created a single simple emblem of the NYC logo made from curly maple wood to adorn the fretboard.

Those who know us, realize that I tend to be a bit more interested in digging further in depth for a bit of

bling regardless of the lack of necessity. Tim researched train collectible memorabilia. Like many my age, as a child I always enjoyed going through a vast supply of buttons. As luck would have it, I have my grandma's old button box and I began to dig for something to call out that it was worthy of being on a guitar and went along with the overall theme. It was a favorite past time over the years to look through and remember the reason a button was worth holding on to. I found some interesting ones but none that spoke to me about trains, so Tim got online and found buttons salvaged from train conductor uniforms with NYC embossed on them. I got butterflies. Then came another question. What is the purpose for buttons of different colored metals? We learned conductors usually wore brass buttons whereas the other uniformed workers wore silver buttons. We purchased the buttons which we inlayed into the bridge wings of the guitar for a touch of historical class.

RF: Tim, describe any build issues you encountered during the Caboose construction process.

TM: Other than the countless hours at the bench, doing the massive number of inlays, this build was pretty straight forward internally but since it was a spec build there was something I had wanted to try for several years which was to create a hybrid laminated side system, so what better time to try that than now? My early guitars utilized single sides but after I studied with Ervin Somogyi, I adopted his laminated double side building method. There is a distinct sound difference between

the two and each method has its benefits. Double sides make the rim stiffer and crack resistant but can stifle sound energy from permeating through the sides towards the player's body. Double sides also stiffen the upper bout's side area making the sides deform less over time under the rotational torque transferred from the neck's string pull leverage.

Single sides can radiate sound energy through them, if they are thin enough. Therefore, I decided to laminate the upper sides but leave the sides below the waist with a single ply for more sound radiation to the player. Since the guitar is not yet strung up to prove my theory, that is my hypothesis for now. I am excited by what I hear just tap testing all over the guitar. I look forward to getting feedback from players at the Artisan Guitar Show of their impressions.

RF: Any closing thoughts?

MM: Let's face it, this business is fun for us, and it is a pretty cool combination to make this guitar related to the American rail system. The redwood top is from Oregon and the poplar back and sides are a part of New York history. It was fun bringing it all together. It helps that Tim is good at what he does on his end, and he lets me go crazy with ideas that instantly pop in my mind. I really like this guy I work with. We have been known for our "history in playable art theme". The Choker guitar was designed after a necklace I wore back in the 1960's. Ask us about the Diamond, the Spar Guitar, the Sonic Sitka Airplane Guitar, the Petosky Stone guitar, the Dominator, the Waldo Guitar, the Flame, the Angel and both Gear-Head guitars. Plus you'll want to check out the Memphis guitar too.

Feel free to share this adventure with your train admiring friends in Harrisburg, PA, New York Central Railroad, the entire United States of America and beyond. I can almost hear the future owner playing "Good Morning America, How Are Ya" tying it all together.

Let's be thankful for those in the past who waved at us when we were little kids laying in the back of dad's car's rear window or freely letting our hair flow while traveling in the back of the open pickup truck beds. Maybe today we can give attention to the train engineers, brakemen and the caboose riders who deserve a wave and a smile.



Also, I would like to give a quick "thank you" to all the men and women of the armed forces who are givers of their own time and hearts. Without my brother trusting me to give his swords to the proper places this guitar would not exist. Many vets and civilians have hopped on the trains to get back and forth across this great nation to see their families, friends and to deliver items to everyday folks who might have taken them for granted. Tim and I are in America where we are grateful the rail system still stands as a strong part of our history and thankful American guitar shows have allowed us to bring our guitars together with history and music lovers around the world.

(Photo Credits: Brian Hunsicker and Tim McKnight)