

Ed Dowling Music and Guitar Repair Biography

Introduction

I have played the guitar for 40 years. I have used my hands to make and repair guitars, banjos, jewelry, music and a house or two. I am a semi-retired mechanical engineer and am applying modern materials, processes and engineering to building the best acoustic guitars in the world. I have repaired many, many guitars and know and love wooden instruments. I like the old ones and specialize in “resurrections” of guitars that are considered un-repairable. I can repair any guitar – if it got ran over by a truck – I can still put it back together. There is a lot of myth that has built up about many aspects of steel string acoustic instruments and I would like to be successful enough to debunk a few. I believe the best all around acoustic guitars are old Yamaha “FG” series dreadnaughts from the ‘70s. They blow away Martins in blind tests for volume and overall sound. In the stringed instrument world there are posers and there are players – I am for the players. I repair guitars because the guitars need repairing – regardless of who owns them. I have repaired guitars for almost no money if the person was poor. Its about the guitar. Its about the guitar.

The Beginning and Awe of the Guitar

I remember seeing a guitar in the furnace room of our house on an army base when I was maybe 4 or 5. It seemed magical to me and I still remember the palm trees stenciled on it. It was most likely a cheap Harmony but I saw something special there and was awed enough to not even touch it.

I got a plastic ukulele for Christmas when I was 12. It came with a little song book and a thing that strapped on to the neck with buttons with the names of the chords on them. Once I could tune it I was able to play the chord buttons and sing the songs that I knew from the book. This took about 2 or 3 hours. I then removed the strap on chord maker and made the chords with my fingers like they were shown in the song book. So I was playing the uke and singing along after a total of 4 or 5 hours of learning how to play. I stepped on it by accident and broke it a few months later.

An encounter with a better quality guitar at a neighbors house when I began high school struck me with the same feeling of awe and respect for this magical that I felt years before. I may have carefully strummed it a little without touching anything but the strings as it lay in the open case. I was starting high school and wanted to get a guitar and was informed by dad that since I had broken the uke that I could not have a guitar. During my high school years I learned to work with my hands – made my own slot car drag strip and cars from model train parts and model car kits. Also rebuilding real car engines and painting a car or 2. After high school I became a draftsman.

The First Guitar Repairs

Now that I had my own money I decided to buy a guitar. I went to a hock shop and bought a piece of crap Kay guitar – the kind with the chinsy metal tailpiece and floating bridge and stenciled paint “binding”. I did start to learn to play but a bad guitar is a real hindrance to learning. I got a better drafting job and at that place one of the other guys found out I was trying to play guitar. He brought in a pretty nice Kay archtop and sold it to me for \$30. The history and travels of old guitars and repairing them started for me

then. The guys name was Franz and he was from Germany. The guitar was left in Germany by a soldier in WWII – “the big one”. His folks moved to America after the war and the guitar returned to the US with them. It was broken at the neck body dovetail joint and I managed to fix it and also varnished it. It was much nicer and I could play it a little easier than the piece of crap I had purchased earlier. So I successfully repaired my first guitar in early 1965. Franz also sold me a ‘Lute” a nice looking instrument but weird – the fretboard was scalloped and the scale was middle-eastern and it could not be tuned to play chords or “American” notes at all. Then the war in Viet Nam and I got drafted. I decided to try and make the lute playable and brought it back to Ft Bragg after being home on leave. I went to the base automotive craft shop and somehow removed the weird fret board and made a replacement from scrap wood and marked the fret positions from another guitar neck. The lute scale was shorter and I still knew nothing about scale length and bridge and saddle positioning but I copied that too from the guitar I was using for as the guide for the fret spacing. I knew about capos by that time and knew that the “short scale” would work on the lute just like a short scale made with a capo on a guitar. I aligned the bridge of the guitar I was using for the fret placement with the lute bridge and marked the fret positions on the scrap wood fret board and cut them with a hack saw.. I knew that the geometry was correct by doing that and it worked. I used the frets from the old lute fret board as I remember That would have been the second guitar I had repaired – in 1966.

The Life Changing Open E Encounter

While at Fort Bragg I bought a decent Silvertone electric and small amp a guy who was “mustered out”. It was at this time that I had the life changing experience of seeing Tom Rush at “The Other Side” – a “folk” club coffee house that did not even serve beer – just hot cider or coffee. That did not matter because that was where I got turned on to good acoustic music. So I am listening to Tom Rush at this little club and he is playing stuff like I never heard before – he is paying Da Blues like Robert Johnson – “If Your Man Gets Busted” was the song and another one about a Train. On both he used a slide – A pinkie or Ring finger slide I think. Man that guitar sounded so good with those full Open E chords and that slide for accents. I still remember most of the verses and sing that song to this very day. It was a few years later when I heard the historic Robert Johnson recordings on vinyl:

So it was break time and we would go out on the sidewalk in front of the coffee house and there was Tom Rush out there too. So I go up to him and ask about what he’s doing to make the guitar sound so good and what was with the slide thing and he says “Open E – I’m playin in Open E”. So I ask what is that and he says “you tighten the 3 strings that you fret to make an E chord so that you don’t have to fret them – wind the A and D strings up 2 frets and the G string up one fret. That was the turning point in my musical life. I went back to the barracks and the next nite I tuned the Silvertone up to open E and I have never played the guitar in standard tuning since that day.

Discovering John Fahey

I got out of the army in the fall of 1967 and soon heard the landmark recordings of John Fahey. I believe John Fahey was the greatest composer for guitar that ever lived on this planet and to this day I have heard no one who comes close. If you like guitar and open tunings and mind blowing compositions that are actually symphonic then you must listen to his recordings Volumes 1 thru 6 on the Takoma label. I could write pages about him but suffice it to say that he treated the guitar like a symphony orchestra. The dissonance of Bartok in some of his compositions is just a small example of his amazing style and talent. He gave me inspiration and direction and influenced my style to the fullest – more that all others combined. He played a lot in open tunings of all kinds and the clarity of his notes and composition style are still with me. His influence on me can be heard in my compositions like Johns Minor Blues, Happiness Rains and Down 2. I can not say enough about this man who ended up a victim of a debilitating syndrome and pretty much living on the streets of Seattle, I believe – before he died during sextuple bypass heart surgery. I'm still chasing John Fahey and get close some times.

Self Teaching Open Tunings and Keeping Track

All I knew when I started was that you could tune the guitar to open E by winding up the 3 strings that make the E cord. From that I learned by trial and error the chords of the first position. I did not know what they were but I began to be able to know their relationship to the fret board by making a chord of the first position that sounded good and full and then barring up the neck until I heard the same sounding barr chord. For example I would make a chord of the first position and would find its tonic mate when barring the 5th fret. To me the chord of the first position became the “Up 5” chord. Today I know that it is called an A chord and that the note A is 5 frets up the neck from the note E. The same for the B chord which I called “Up 7” Then on to a chord that matched the 10th fret that I knew as “Up 10” now I know it is a D chord. Now this is very important: I realized that if I went up to the 5th fret and barred it and then played the “up 5” chord that mathematically it would add 5 plus 5 and make an “Up 10 chord” I tried it and it worked. So I evolved my own complete system of chords and understood how they related to the Open chord and the fretboard. This turns out to be a very good way of relating to the guitar – even in standard tuning. I feel that this way of “keeping track” makes a whole lot of sense and it is a very important part of my teaching open tunings. There were some nice sounding chords that did not quite work with this initial insight but they made sense when I discovered the 5 string banjo and the Earl Scruggs Banjo Book.

5 String Banjo and the Earl Scruggs Book

I found a beautiful 5 string Bacon Banjo in an antique store in Clarkdale, Az around 1972. I had to fix it but my repair skills had developed to a point by then that I did a good job and it had good action and I set it up good. The Earl Scruggs book on how to play the 5 string banjo had recently come out and I got a copy at the music store in Cottonwood. I learned that it was tuned to Open G and soon discovered that many of the fingerings of the chords of the first position were the same as the ones I was playing on Open E guitar – they were just 3 frets higher and the littlest string had been moved to the top most position – but the other 4 strings would make the same “Up 5” and Up 7”

and “Up 10” chords and now I knew their names like C was up 5 from the open G and D was Up 7 from G and F was up 10 from G. So now I could transpose the names back to my open E guitar. I also learned that If I put a capo on the 3rd fret of the guitar that I was indeed in the same Open G as the banjo! Now Earl was a genius and a very competent musician. By reading everything he wrote in the book and looking at all of those beautiful chord charts I learned about Minor chords, 6th an 7th chords, augmented and diminished chords. He also gave very good explanations as to how and why they differ from the major chords. Even if you don’t play the 5 string I recommend reading all of the text in his book – it shows so much about what a serious musician can do to make the best music possible.

Guitar Repair As an Ongoing Evolution

In late 1967 I was given a beautiful Martin 00-17 - an all solid mahogany guitar – even the top. They are awesome guitars and I will take one over the spruce top version every time. At some point the bridge failed and I replaced it with a typical “belly” bridge made for a full sized Martin. It worked fine and shortly after that came the Bacon 5 string that I referred to in the previous section. I had to do a number of repairs on it and they went fine too. A few years went by and I eventually hooked up with Mick King and Oscar Betts and I began to do repairs on their instruments just to keep them running. I also went to a sale at a music store in phoenix – a semi full of parts from the recently defunct Kay guitar company. Man if I could just get back to that truck – I would buy so much stuff..... At some point I got a very good book written Hideo Kamamoto about guitar repair – the best one ever written so far anyway. With that as a guide I continued repairing guitars and banjos. I then started making banjos, mostly using existing bodies and making necks from scratch. By that time I was going to bluegrass festivals and competing in contests with Mick and Oscar, One day I got a visit from a guy named Jeff Stelling – he was just starting out making 5 string banjos, I was a silversmith and traded him a beautiful turquoise and silver belt buckle for one of his banjo “pots” but no resonator or neck. I made a solid maple neck for it and Mick King got it from me before it was totally finished. It was a great banjo and he played it the rest of his life.

I stayed with the bluegrass thing with Mick King and Oscar Betts for about 15 years. Sometimes Oscar would be gone for a few years and the “man in the middle with the guitar and the fiddle” would be replaced by either Don Joseph or Lee Downey. Mickey to the left and me on the right. With Oscar I would play the guitar when he played the fiddle and then I would play the mandolin when he played guitar – but Mickey always played the banjo. Imaging a 12 year old kid riding a bicycle no hands and playing the 5 string – Micky used to do that. You can hear some mighty fine bluegrass from us 3 – “The Innocent Bystanders” live at the Spirit Room on the 2 cd set. I had a full time job but played at the spirit room for about 10 years with the “Innocents” Micky was very talented and so was Oscar. I was the stable one – I had the p.a. and fixed the instruments and had a truck to haul us around in. Too many stories to tell here. Note that I played bluegrass guitar in open E with a capo on the 3rd fret to be in G – you can hear me on the 2 cd set and would not know it was open tuned if I did not tell you. I also played the mandolin in Open G and it was a pretty good and slightly unique mando sound – again it can be heard on the Innocent Bystanders double cd set. All during this

time I continued to repair instruments – the mandolin I played then and still use today was broken pretty much in half when I got it. I also built 10 or 15 5-string banjos during that time.

The craziness of genius of both Mick and Oscar finally got to me and I quit playing with them in the early '90's. I bought a 4 track 1/2 speed tape deck and started to record a much more eclectic type of music – from rockin blues to ballads. The tape recordings really helped me develop my voice and singing style. I played guitar, slide guitar and mandolin and sang 3 part harmony. The result was my cd “Reliable Transportation” which is also available on the web site. More working full time and recording at nite and then I got the idea to make an acoustic guitar out of metal. I was sitting on a metal porch swing playing a cheap guitar and when it touched the metal side of the swing it got louder and that is where the metal guitar idea started. I eventually made one and it turned out to be a very good acoustic guitar. After tweaking and tuning for a month or 2 I began using it for live performing and recording. I installed a Fishman undersaddle pickup and the Acoustic Matrix pre amp in the guitar and it sounds so good thru a P.A.. That guitar became known as “ET” because of the weird upper bout sound holes looking like ET eyes. It is still my only acoustic guitar for performing and can be seen on the Open Tunings DVD, youtube and my new DVD – “Home Comfort”.

Early retirement and Instrument Repair In the late “90's I started my own engineering consulting business and it went well until a steep decline in the economy and manufacturing in late 2001. By February 2002 I had to sell my new house and find a low rent place to live. I was very fortunate to find a wonderful run down shack on an old ranch right on the Verde River next to the national forest. I have lived there ever since. Shortly after moving here I began repairing guitars almost full time. I repaired over 200 guitars for one customer in Sedona – maybe 2 or 3 a week for 2 years. I also developed enough of a reputation to be the “go to guy” for guitar repair and set up in the Verde Valley. I was lucky enough to also find a part time job doing cad based engineering for a company making high tech ‘Encoders’ for industry. I now have time to pursue making the “best acoustic guitars on the planet”. I have a ways to go but I may make it – one experimental guitar at a time.