

MIKE LIPE

Owner
Lipe Guitars USA
Tujunga/Fillmore

Mike Lipe is a literal one-man manufacturing operation for hand-made guitars. He works out of his garage at his east San Fernando Valley home as well as in a space in a former orange packing plant in Fillmore. He makes the high-end Signature series guitars and the less-expensive Pro series. He uses wood from swamp ash and alder for the bodies and maple for the necks.

How did you start making guitars?

I got a job in a music store and took the place of a guitar repairman. I thought it was my niche and I kept going ever since. I got jobs at a couple of manufacturing companies and I worked my way up and became a master luthier (guitar maker), which is getting experience and learning the right way from instructions from higher-ups who were intelligent luthiers.

You didn't get into guitar making because you were a musician?

I was a musician. I could not support myself playing five nights a week because they were not paying that well. So, I did music on the side – and I still do it – and started working in a music store because I would be around musicians and could get gigs. It would be a way to stay in the music field.

How do you sell your guitars?

I have had dealers and sold them that way. But sometimes the dealers slow down and you are at their mercy. So, it's online sales basically. A lot of stuff goes on eBay and Reverb.com (an online marketplace for musical instruments) and then through my website.

Who are your customers?

My guitars are boutique guitars, they are quite expensive. So, I have guys that are either pros or have been around a lot and experienced a lot of different guitars. It's kind of like having a Ford and moving up to a Porsche. It's getting a better, more fancy, unique guitar than the basic production models in the shops.

Have any big-name artists bought your guitars?

When I used to work for the Ibanez custom shop I did a lot of guitars for Joe Satriani, Steve Vai, Andy Timmons, a lot of the rock players. Alex Skolnick. But with my guitars the competition of having to give them a guitar compared

to the big companies is pretty hard. I don't have that kind of money.

Do people buy guitars because of the sound quality or the look?

Sound quality. The look gives them the style. You'll have a country guitar player that will play a Fender-style guitar rather than a rock guitar, like what they call the Super-Strat. That is more for the heavy metal player, rock player or fusion player. You have your semi-hollow body guitars for the jazz players or blues players. When they go out on a stage

they want something that gives them a look and goes with the body style of what that genre of music is.

What is the vision for your company?

To survive and to expand as much as I can. But I don't really want to get into paying the employee tax and stuff like that.

Then how do you plan on expanding?

Eventually maybe selling it out to somebody or have someone who wants to back it up. That is my basic idea.



Craftsman: Mike Lipe with guitar pieces inside former orange packing plant in Fillmore.

Why is Los Angeles a good place for making guitars?

It's Hollywood and the recording background. When I started, it was the place. In the Hollywood area you had Whiskey A Go Go, the Sunset Strip and a lot of studios. It was the place for all the rock stars.

What makes your guitars unique?

They are all handmade. I started in 1976 and I have a lot of knowledge of what the player likes and how to give them what they want. I use the best quality wood and have some little unique things in my guitars.

What is the price?

\$2,895, that is my Signature series. There are a couple of upgrades that can make them go up a couple hundred bucks. Then I have a new series that I call the Pro series that is \$1,950. It is not the roasted wood so it's a little cheaper.

How many guitars do you make in a year?

Seventy five. It's about five to six a month.

Why are there so many guitar makers in the Valley?

I think there is more space. It is still L.A., and L.A. is such a mecca for musicians, and it's a good place to be. The weather is incredible. These are the best conditions to do this.

How did you start making guitars?

I started as a sound engineer. I was always playing bass and guitar and at some point, I got a bad guitar and I stumbled upon this guy who was starting a luthier school in Israel, where I'm from. I decided to take that year course to learn how to build guitars and to fix them. After

that course was done, I was hooked. I started building my own shop and collecting tools. I then decided to move here (in 2007) and pursue this as a career.

What makes your guitars unique?

A combination of a lot of things. Wood selection is very important to us. You cannot be cheap on that part. You have to get the right stuff and get it cut the right way with the right weight.

What else?

A lot of attention to detail. We handshape all of our necks so the feel is more organic, the way

we dress the frets, the radius on our fingerboards, the pickups that we use, the finish that we use and all the care and love we give to it.

How do you sell your guitars?

It started with direct word-of-mouth sales. I picked up and now we have a few dealers, some in the U.S., some in Japan. We have dealers in Sweden. This is where it is going right now.

Who are your customers?

Working musicians. This is where I am aiming for, anyway. I want these guitars to be these tools for the job that needs to be done. When I buy a tool, I buy the best that I can buy and know that it won't break.

Have any big names bought your guitars?

My friend, the reason I am here, Sean Hurwitz, he started playing with Smash Mouth and then moved to playing with Enrique Iglesias. He's made a big name for himself. I actually sold one guitar to Walter Becker of Steely Dan. Irwin Thomas is another one. And Chris Traynor from Bush. He's one of my best friends and customers.

Are celebrity endorsements important?

Yes, definitely. It's important for everybody, on the artist side and on our side.

Do people buy guitars for the sound quality of the look?

A combination of both. If it looks the way you want it to look and draws you in, and then the sound and the feel feels right, you are sold. I think it's why people end up with so many guitars. They are pretty to look at and hang on the wall. They are irresistible.

What is the price of your guitars?

About \$3,000.

AVI SHABAT

Owner
Shabat Guitar
West Hills

Avi Shabat operates a guitar manufacturing and repair business out of the garage of his west San Fernando Valley home. With a staff of two employees, he makes hand-crafted instruments for rock and blues musicians using swamp ash and alder for the bodies and quarter-sawn maple and rosewood for the necks. Last year, the startup produced about 40 guitars.

What is your vision for your company?

To make as many great instruments as we can for playing musicians. I have no intent to compromise quality for quantity ever. We'll try to make them faster but just as good. We are at the point where we know exactly how we want a guitar to come out and how to do it. The vision is to get to a point where the team we have right now can make a good living doing what they are doing and pick it up from there.

How do you plan on expanding your business?

I started this as a repair shop and then bought tools to make guitars. I was never into taking a big loan. I saw other manufacturers and how that worked for them. I think it is better to create a name for yourself, start small, without taking any loans or any risks and to grow organically. That is how we are doing it. If the demand is there, we will adjust accordingly.

– Profiles by Mark Madler



Boss: Avi Shabat with supplies, power tools and employees in his West Hills workshop.