

FEATURE



Back of the China Guitar  
by Larry Robinson.

# Inlay Artists You Should Meet

BY GAYLE DRAKE PAUL

Okay, we love guitars. Mostly it's the sound and the feel and what they allow us to express and achieve. But sometimes it's their beauty that first captures our imaginations and our hearts. Fine craftsmanship is only the beginning in this golden age of lutherie; most guitars being made now have a better fit and finish than ever before. But the tantalizing and mysterious arts of fine inlay and marquetry have in recent years entered a golden age of their own, making already gorgeous instruments beyond drool-worthy.

There are two ways to do inlay: hand-cutting and CNC; marquetry is done strictly by hand. The process begins very much the same either way: a customer calls with a commission or an idea, and there is a conversation about what they want, how much they want to spend and when they want to see it. A discussion is had about materials to be inlaid, whether it's abalone, paua, laminate sheets, plastic, glitter, diamond chips, rare woods—it's almost all fair game, and artists are increasingly willing to mix and match the

commonplace with the lowly or the exotic in order to make a project work.

These artists are putting guitars in the same context as other visual arts to create gallery-worthy pieces that remain uncompromisingly playable and listenable. Meet Harvey Leach, Larry Robinson and Judy Threet, three hand-inlay artists; David Petillo, a marquetry artist, and Tom Ellis, one of the pioneers of the CNC inlay process and the founder of Precision Pearl. ►►

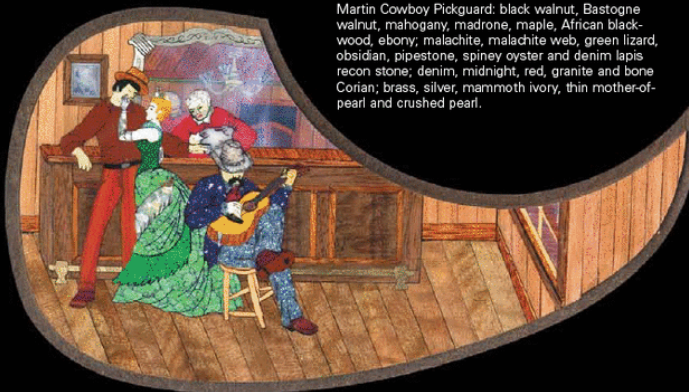




## 5 Inlay Artists You Should Meet



Leach's Cherub: 14k gold lettering; mammoth ivory, red coral, Corian, brass, gold pearl and walnut cherub; malachite, green rippled abalone vine; green heart abalone headstock trim; crushed pearl headstock binding.



Martin Cowboy Pickguard: black walnut, Bastogne walnut, mahogany, madrone, maple, African blackwood, ebony; malachite, malachite web, green lizard, obsidian, pipestone, spiny oyster and denim lapis recon stone; denim, midnight, red, granite and bone Corian; brass, silver, mammoth ivory, thin mother-of-pearl and crushed pearl.

Back of Samurai guitar: sycamore, madrone, black walnut, Bastogne walnut, maple, koa, mahogany, laminated veneers; various Corian "stone" colors (midnight, red, blue, bone, evergreen); Agoya shell, pale abalone, green rippled abalone, silver, malachite, mammoth ivory, thin mother-of-pearl; blue and green Atlante; obsidian recon stone.





Geisha fretboard: Agoya shell, crushed pearl; blue and black Abalone; red Micarta; red, midnight, sand and lavender Corian; brass, mahogany, ebony and mammoth ivory.



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# Harvey Leach

## Cutting Edge Inlay

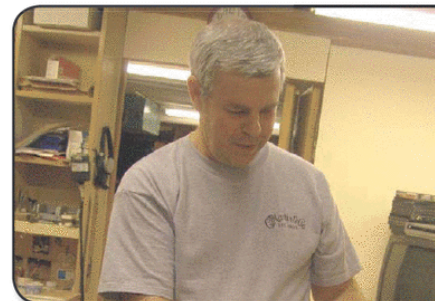
Cedar Ridge, CA

Harvey Leach thought he was going to build banjos, because they have that big resonator on the back that's like a blank canvas. His first inlay project was on his first banjo—with a ten-page instruction book on how to do inlay as his only guide. "Banjo players like all that flashy stuff," he says with a chuckle, "I thought you couldn't build a banjo without covering it with inlay."

The transition to guitar came pretty quickly. He realized that there were a lot more guitar players in the world than banjo players, and being a guitarist himself, it felt right. His first guitar was a wedding present for his wife in 1980: "Well, I gave her the parts as a wedding present; I assembled it a little later than that!" Leach eventually parodied his struggles with time management on one of his own guitars: there's an angel painting the brand on the headstock—so far there's "Le."

Despite his propensity to get things done at the last possible moment, he's become one of the go-to guys for boundary-pushing inlay for a long list of premier builders, including Paul Reed Smith, D'Angelico, Kevin Ryan, James Olson, the late Lance McCollum and Martin. "Martin wanted stuff that looked like it should be hanging in a museum," he says, "a whole different level. That led me into finding ways to do stuff nobody else was doing."

His work is often almost holographic, a technique he says he discovered almost by accident: "Abalone is basically shell—like abalone and mother-of-pearl—that has been sliced very thin, approximately .007 inches thick (about the thickness of a human hair), and then laminated like plywood into thicker sheets. You can buy Abalone as thick as you want, but the more layers, the more expensive it gets. A single sheet might be ten dollars, where a piece 1/16" thick might be well over one hundred. I had a polar bear inlay project where I needed to create the look of ice, and there is a shell called Donkey Shell that has a look that reminded me of the way ice would form on the windows in the Vermont winters where I grew up. So, me being a Yankee and therefore thrifty, I figured I would just buy a single sheet and glue it to a black substrate to make it thick enough to work with. When I did, the black showed through in places; amazingly the effect was exactly like ice! That got me thinking about the possibilities of using the translucence and



the chatoyancy [the effects of light and angle on reflective material] of the thin shell to create mirrored effects."

This "smoke and mirrors" technique [so nicknamed by Dick Boak of Martin] was the inspiration behind his commemorative September 11 guitar. "The first time I used it intentionally," says Leach, "was to create fog at the base of the Statue of Liberty." Leach broke new ground by using materials with different shades of the same color to create dramatic shading effects and 3-dimensionality: "After I finished it I would take it to shows and people would walk up to it, stare at it for a while and then walk away crying without even saying a word to me."

Leach doesn't like to think anything is impossible, and relishes complicated challenges. "In really complex designs," Leach continues, "the biggest challenge is deciding which things to do first. Sometimes the place to start is determined by how you are going to get in and out of the cut, and sometimes it's how you are going to hang onto the piece while it's being cut. I like to cut pieces that are very small. Most often, impossible means somebody wants an inlay in the top of the guitar itself. Inlaying complex shapes into spruce is nearly impossible because of the dramatic difference between the summer and the winter grain of the wood. Winter grain (the dark line) is like rock maple and the soft grain is like cork. Ironically, it's the soft grain that creates the problems. Really, nothing is impossible, but I have to do the Mona Lisa someday, and I'm not quite ready yet for that." 

### Harvey Leach

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