

STETSBAR

By Ward Meeker

In 1988, Eric Stets was doing well, building a career as a machinist making molds and tools for various industries in and around Buffalo, New York. Then, a motorcycle accident changed all that.

While on the mend, Stets was subjected to 10 surgeries over an 18-month span, followed by several more months of rehab. Then, when he was finally ready to get back to work...

"My boss saw me only as a liability because of my injuries and long absence," he recalled. "He told me, 'You've been off for a long time and have forgotten most of what you know. Maybe you should go somewhere else.'"

"That really pissed me off," Stets said. "But, I turned the negative energy around, and came away thinking, 'I'll show them.'"

Suddenly forced to become self-sufficient, he started a business doing what he knew best – manufacturing and grinding tooling for the auto industry and architectural designers. In his spare time, though, he was devoting time and energy to his passion for music and guitars, developing a vibrato that was different from anything on the market.

"I had this desire to equip my '71 Les Paul Custom with a vibrato that would perform well but not destroy the instrument through invasive installation," he said. "It took some time, since at first I wasn't able to give it my full attention, but I developed a number of prototypes until I had one that was reliable."



Eric Stets with his prized (and Stetsbar-equipped) '71 Gibson Les Paul Custom.

STETSBAR
Eric Stets, West Seneca, New York
www.stetsbar.com

His "A ha!" moment came in early 1990, when, although the fundamental design had developed to avoid routing the guitar, the way that his bridge moved was still imperfect. "The final pieces of the puzzle came together when a manufacturer's rep stopped over, with samples of some new linear precision bearings, and their functionality was exactly what I needed."

Still, the vibrato remained secondary to the "real" business of his shop, and at first, Stets had no real plans to manufacture it. Nonetheless, professional experience had taught him the importance of obtaining a patent on his design. "I was pretty sure players would be interested in it," he said.

Several thousands dollars later, he was rewarded with a patent – and empty pockets. "Suddenly, I had a real need to sell some of the units, simply to make my money back. That was when the real work began."

So, as you decided to recoup some of the funds invested in the patent process, did you relegate more time to making the Stetsbar?

Not really. I still could work on them only after all the Stets Machine work was done. And sales started gradually; I was selling them to other players locally, sold a

couple to local dealers, and some through ads in *Vintage Guitar* and other magazines. It was through one of those ads that we were contacted by a U.K. company called Madison and Fifth, which was interested in selling Stetsbar in Europe. Within a couple months, they became our first distributor. By 2005, demand had picked up enough that I started another company – Stets Metal Arts. Eventually, demand increased such that it kind of took over the shop and I had to do a lot of juggling to keep both businesses going in the right direction.

Initially, did you offer just one version of the Stetsbar?

Yes, the Stop Tail, for Gibson applications. I contacted Gibson and I asked if all of their guitars used the same location measurements for their stop-bars and tailpieces. They confirmed that they were indeed consistent, and from that point, I advertised that the Stetsbar would fit Gibson, Epiphone, and other manufacturers using the same stop bar and tune-o-matic-style bridge.

At what point did you expand?

Madison and Fifth was increasing its sales and getting magazine coverage in the U.K. and Europe. We were also working on branding and general marketing. Here in the U.S., I relied

on advertising, reviews, and NAMM shows to further increase exposure.

In 2010, sales reached a level that enabled us to move production to an overseas manufacturer, which gave me the time to deal with design and sales in the U.S. It also enabled us to lower prices but still get dealer and distributors onboard. More importantly, it became an attractive option to the boutique-builder community.

From that point, our international business has increased steadily with distributors in the U.K., France, Germany, Italy, Australia, and Japan and our North American distributor is making waves.

Our product range has grown, too. Since that first Stop Tail design, I've developed a Stetsbar for the Telecaster-style design and, most recently, for the Stratocaster-style bridge/tailpiece. The Hard Tail design is a five-hole-bridge application, and we have a model specifically for builders whose designs don't directly copy the others. Some of our other products include fine tuners for guitars with locking nuts, and a replacement vintage-style arm for those who want the old-style look and feel.

What sets your tailpieces apart?

Its non-invasive installation, and its pitch

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(LEFT TO RIGHT) The Stetsbar Stop Tail on a late-model Gibson thinline. The Stetsbar T-Style on a Fender Telecaster.

range, feel, and stability. With the exception of the builder's model, you do not need to put extra holes in the guitar. That means the player gets a really good trem, but can remove it for restoration or transfer to another guitar. Also, its true linear motion, with the string anchors moving with the bridge, insures tuning stability. It offers adjustments for different-gauge string tensions and its easy to string. And it has a good range of travel – one octave down and a third up – and an extremely smooth, light feel.

Do you have help in the shop?

Yes, we hired our first employee in 2008, and we now have four.

What are your hopes for the future of the industry as it per-

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ains to small-shop manufacturers like yourself?

Well, I see more and better products constantly being developed for the guitarist, and I think the music industry is strong and will get stronger. There seem to be more and more concerts in every town across the country and around the world.

I think that small-shop manufacturers have a real opportunity to get their products known. The internet can give us a profile internationally, so, if you have a genuinely good product, stick with it, and are prepared for the long haul – and you have a bit of

luck – there's no reason your idea can't be in the hands of guitarists around the world.

What are your goals for Stetsbar?

We enjoy the challenge of meeting the needs of any guitar player who wants to expand their sound. It's a real buzz to see the acceptance we're getting, and it would be great to become the mainstream option. I think we've been successful with Stetsbar as a retrofit unit, but there are a lot of guitar manufacturers out there, so we want to build on the initial success. VG

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