

*Acoustic* explores the world of an illustrious Canadian guitar maker and innovator noted for his skill in the art of inlay via £25k's worth of guitar.

Words: Stephen Bennett Images: The Acoustic Music Company

Devotees of the fashion world (so all of us guitarists, then) insist that the catwalk eccentricities of today end up shaping the must-have, high-street uniforms of tomorrow. So it is with luthiery. The bigger makers – even at the highest level – continue to look to the innovators; the few designers and builders prepared to risk the kind of left-field experimentation that might just take the sonic and aesthetic possibilities of the acoustic guitar to the next level. And if it's invention you're looking for, William "Grit" Laskin is your man.

*Acoustic* found him on top storytelling form recently, at a specially-organised gathering at The Acoustic Music Company; the latest in a line of "legendary luthiers" lured to

Brighton by the boundless six-string passion of proprietor and patron Trevor Moyle.

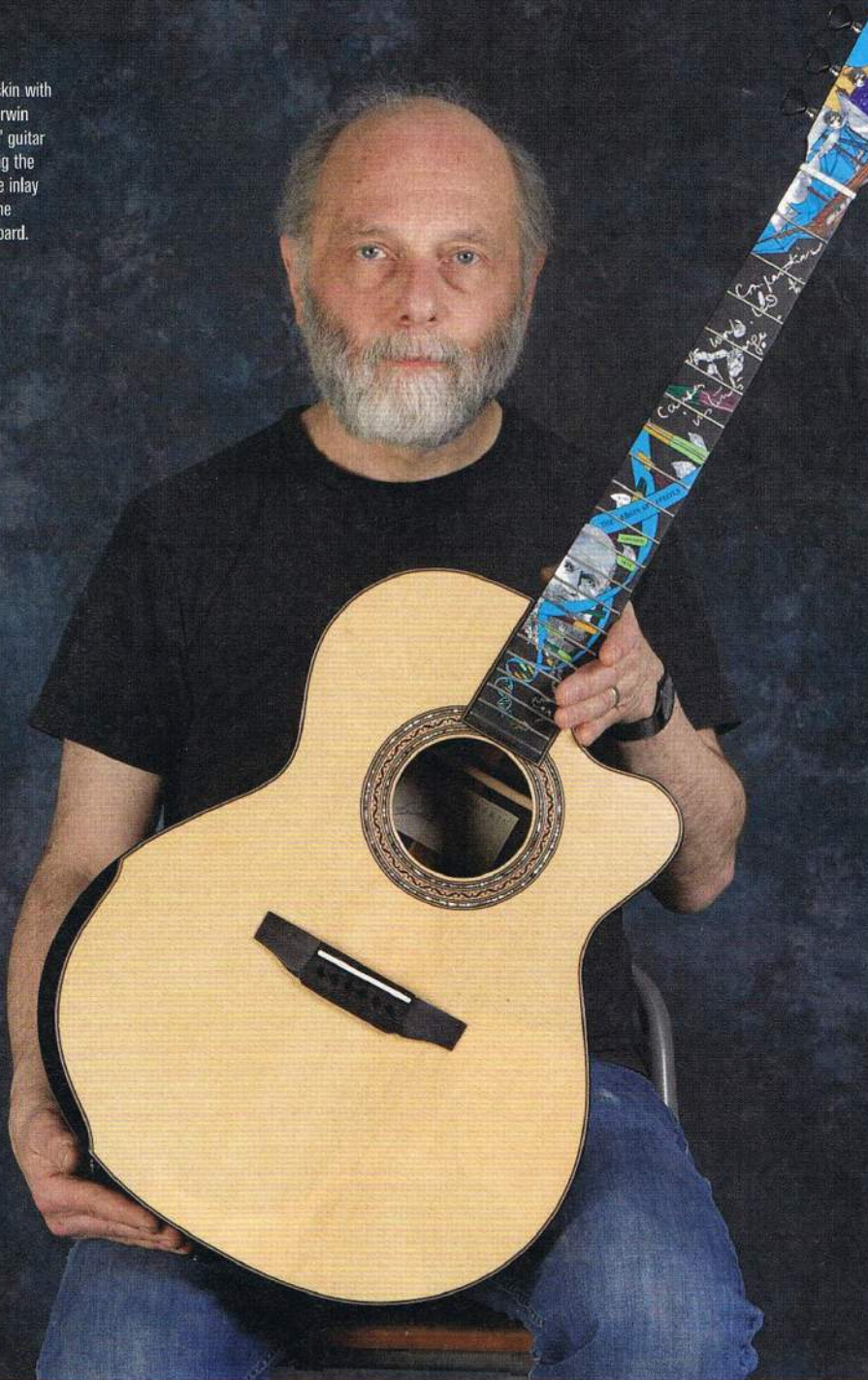
Armed with tales of exploding guitars, miniature sliding doors, babies' nappies and prisoners-of-war, Laskin's a great talker and, happily, for a man whose imagination wanders the realms of fantasy figuring out ways to make them real, he's down-to-earth, generous and (this could be the secret) insatiably curious.

One look at a Laskin guitar – and the photographs are jaw-dropping – will reveal the particular skill he's probably most renowned for: inlay. And though it's only the tip of the iceberg, this is headstock and fretboard decoration taken to new levels; astonishing in its intricacy, vibrancy of colour and exquisite delicacy. Initially, the sheer visual overload might seem a bit much for some, but this is,

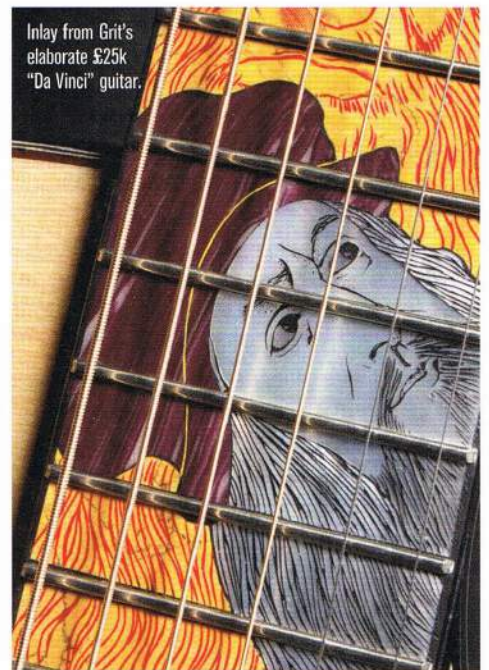
undeniably, instrument building as fine art – and to carp would be like complaining you can't boil a Fabergé egg. Besides, Laskin guitars sound as good, if not better, than just about anything else out there. Which helps. Like half-imagined movies, frozen in abalone, turquoise, ebony and precious metals, Laskin develops visual themes that run the entire length of headstock and fingerboard, telling stories of musicians, writers, artists and inventors or depicting the beauty of the natural world. His reimagining of the liquid energy of Hokusai's famous blue wave, for example, only becomes a mind-boggling piece of craftsmanship once you get past the immediate, eye-popping, wow-factor.

And today, the distinguished Mr. Laskin ("please, call me Grit") is here to talk about his 44 years (and counting) as a guitar maker, and he

Grit Laskin with the "Darwin to DNA" guitar featuring the intricate inlay down the fingerboard.



In Laskin's case, his inlay work is unsurpassed and a constantly evolving mastery of the art.



Inlay from Grit's elaborate \$25k "Da Vinci" guitar.

tells the tale with a self-deprecating lightness of touch far removed from the implications of his childhood nickname.

Born in Hamilton, Ontario, Laskin took up the guitar at the age of nine; his father determined to give young William the musical opportunities he himself had been denied. The son developed into a fine player, most notably as an accompanist to the late Canadian folk-great, Stan Rogers but his own fame would eventually derive from the craftsmanship he learned off the back of a teenage whim.

Following a chance encounter with Jean Larrivée at a Toronto folk festival, Laskin found himself examining one of the Canadian guitar guru's newly-made instruments for evidence of any visible join between the headstock veneer and the top of the neck; he couldn't believe

that level of build-accuracy and precision was achievable by hand. On the spot, he asked Larrivée to take him on as an apprentice and soon the scruffy 17-year-old would-be-musician, scraping a living as a gopher in a recording studio, found himself on a three-month trial alongside another suspicious-looking kid who'd been hanging round the Larrivée workshop drinking beer – one Sergei de Jonge.

Now, almost half a century on, Laskin is proud to represent a tradition that stretches back through Larrivée's own mentor, a German prisoner-of-war called Edgar Munch who learned his luthiery skills while incarcerated in England alongside a Spaniard who'd worked on Ramirez instruments before the war, thus forming part of a chain running right back to Antonio Torres, the acknowledged "Stradivarius of the guitar".

Simply knowing he's bearing the standard of such an illustrious lineage, however, isn't enough for Laskin. He's determined to leave his mark; one that we're all now benefiting from, in its multiple guises, whether we realise it or not.

Laskin was the first luthier to implement the idea of the arm-bevel. The impetus came from a classical player whose long hours of practice and performance during the late 80s were causing him serious pain in the right arm. The introduction of the bevel not only increased playing comfort but allowed blood to flow more naturally through said arm, increasing hand efficiency and virtually eliminating right-shoulder problems from the strain of reaching around the box. Despite medical experts lauding the innovation, Laskin's luthier contemporaries thought this was just another of ol' Grit's

gimmicks. He's never made a guitar without the bevel since and almost all of those doubters now employ a similar design or offer it as a custom option. Kevin Ryan began to explore his own modifications in the 1990s, but by then Laskin had already moved on to the chest bevel. That one's catching on, too.

Then there's the "side-port" – the industry's more elegant expression for "that extra hole in the top bit". Developed partly in collaboration with his old pal Sergei de Jonge, again in the late 1980s, it's another idea picked up from a frustrated classical player who'd been struggling with moving from loud to soft in concert settings, what with the competition from massed ranks of sawing cellos and violins. Laskin came up with a strategically placed sliding-door device which, when opened, gave a remarkable power-boost from the perspective of both the listener and the player. The results were so striking that it soon became a question of "why bother messing with the fiddly door-part?" Plucking a single note on the Da Vinci guitar, Laskin demonstrates – one hand covering then uncovering the side-port. The difference is immediately striking; the enhanced volume and sustain bringing a clearly-discernible richness to the sound.

Alongside the building experiments, though, there's a cautionary tale of moisture (or the lack thereof). Laskin resolved to take on the problem of how to humidify instruments subjected to extreme climate changes. He spoke to the New York cellist who'd invented the never-quite-adequate "Damp-It" system. How to improve it? He researched others' attempts at sealing the soundhole to humidify the body from the inside. The resultant tensions between the neck and the body soon turned into cracks, then chasms. Time for a rethink. It was at this point Laskin began to consider the everyday miracle of the disposable nappy; specifically, its capacity to get rid of "moisture" while staying dry against the skin. Its manufacturers introduced him to the wonders of Gore-Tex and it wasn't long before Laskin had patented a device – to be suspended between the strings – employing that company's ingenious, one-way-water-stopping chemical membrane. Dean Markley agreed to market the early version but no one thought to add the warning that over-humidifying is as harmful as too much drying out – with disastrous results. Customers thought the instrument's moisture levels were going to be regulated in all climates at all times. No. Within months, the high-end guitar collectors of steamy, midsummer New York were filing heavyweight insurance claims for guitars that were simply exploding – the sides expanding so much they shot off the bindings. It was the no-brain equivalent of

Initially inspired by the luminous virtuosity of American illustrator, Maxfield Parrish, Laskin now devises ever more elaborate ways for his customers to capture and commemorate aspects of their own lives or celebrate their artistic heroes.

