

By Jim Roberts



THESE DAYS, MAKING A LIVING

by building basses isn't just a matter of finding the right materials and having the skill to shape them into instruments. Communicating with current and potential customers is equally as important—and social media is playing a large and growing part in doing that successfully. "It has made things quite a bit more challenging," says Rob Elrick of Elrick Bass Guitars. "There has been a shift in the consumer demographic toward millennials. You have to always be in front of them—repetition is what delivers the message."

Rob has been building basses since 1992. Trained at Berklee, he was a working musician before he began to make instruments. "Early on, I was supporting the business by playing gigs—which was kind of the opposite of my original intention," he says. "But after a number of years, it became clear that the business was going to demand more of my attention." Unlike part-time luthiers who see bass building as a good hobby, Rob is fully committed to his craft. "The bass guitar has been the center of my life for so long that it has become a lifestyle. I have constructed a life around it that began first

Jim Roberts was the founding editor of *BASS PLAYER* and also served as the magazine's publisher and group publisher. He is the author of *How the Fender Bass Changed the World* and *American Basses: An Illustrated History & Player's Guide* (both published by Backbeat Books/Hal Leonard).

Rob Elrick Of Elrick

as a musician and evolved over time to include luthiery and the founding of my company. Bass is what I do."

Rob has built more than 1,200 basses since opening his shop in Chicago, doing all of the work himself without the CNC machines and other automated devices currently used by many luthiers. "The term 'handmade' is kind of cloudy," he says, noting that it's often applied to instruments with primarily machine-made components. "My instruments are not handmade instruments; they are *hand-carved* instruments. There is a distinction."

In addition to the basses that Rob builds, there is the Elrick Expat series, instruments made to his specifications by partners in the Czech Republic, introduced in 2008. "It's not a secondary line; it's a supplemental line," he explains. "It's for people who expect a certain standard of quality at a price that's a bit more approachable." For the Expats, Rob chooses the materials, sets production standards, and does the final setup himself.

Elrick offers made-in-USA basses in both bolt-on and neck-through configurations, double or single cutaway, with a wide range of materials and options. The figured woods chosen for body tops are often spectacularly beautiful, and the craftsmanship is impeccable. Although the aesthetics are what you notice first, Rob emphasizes that building instruments to suit his customers' musical needs is what motivates him, whether they want a classic 34"-scale 4-string or something more exotic—such as the Elrick e-volution Gold Series SLC 6-string that he made for Steve Lawson, reviewed by E.E. Bradman in BP's November '16 issue.

Rob's latest project is a limited-edition instrument to celebrate his company's 25th anniversary in 2017. Available as a 4-, 5-, or 6-string, it is planned as a single-cutaway neck-through with a swamp-ash body and multi-laminate neck. "The anniversary bass will have a buckeye top," says Rob. "I've been saving some one-piece buckeye tops, which are extraordinarily rare. The fretboards will be bird's-eye maple with a special inlay pattern consisting of the flowers and leaves of the primary woods." Custom Aero pickups with matching wooden covers and rose-gold hardware will complete the package.

When he's not searching for top-quality materials or hand-carving an instrument, Rob has been focusing on raising his company's level of consumer engagement. Although his instruments were previously available only through authorized dealers, the changing nature of the market has required more direct communication with bass players for custom quotes and sales. "Standing out from the crowd has become difficult, because the crowd has become so large. It was hard to get a foothold in the market 25 years ago—I can't even imagine how you would do it now."

Regardless of how he reaches his customers, Rob says that he remains committed to building "an instrument for *players*—a good, practical, functional, working bass. I tried a lot of things early on until I found the place, with experience, where things work the best. And honestly, I think that the instruments that perform the best are relatively simple. That's where I'm at."

For more about Elrick basses, go to elrick.com. **BP**