

THE G.A.L., HEALDSBURG, N.C.A.L., AND ME

PART 1

By Ervin Somogyi

This is a personal account of my experiences with the Guild of American Luthiers, the Healdsburg Guitar Festival, and other guitar organizations with which I have had long-standing affiliation.

I've written a lot about the guitar and the world of the guitar; much of this has been practical and technical. As a matter of fact, *most* guitar-related writing has always been technical, archival, historical, anecdotal, iconographic, statistical, commercially oriented, or relying on interviews of personalities that have been significant in the guitar's making or its music. But very little of any of that has been first-hand reporting on anything one has been involved in. I mean, let's face it: guitar makers aren't exactly writers. As I get older and have more and more to look back on and perhaps reassess, I've been doing more *personal* thinking and writing. I think this is pretty common with anyone who's been doing something for a long time. I don't know that anyone has yet written anything about their own experiences with the seminal organizations in their field of work, though. Much less has anyone written about these things retrospectively, as a sort of revisiting and summing up of one's long-term experiences and insights, social context, watershed moments, one's various victories and losses, etc. I thought that it might be interesting to write something like that. Also, someone may want to some day write a more in-depth future account of these times, activities, and organizations; why not have some material to refer to that was written by someone who was there? In any event this is a longish article, because I'm describing a forty-plus-year-long history.

THE G.A.L.

I made my first guitar in 1970, and The Guild of American Luthiers was the first instrument makers' organization in this country -- or any country, really -- that I ever heard of. I think it was the first such organization to have existed since the waning of the European Guild system three hundred years ago. However, while those groups had been closed to outsiders, the G.A.L. was open to anyone who cared to pay the membership fees. It was founded in 1972 by a few of the newly emergent and hardy members of the American guitar-making-by-hand community -- one of whom was Tim Olsen, a Tacoma, Washington native who early on became (and has been ever since) the director of that organization. The G.A.L. was designed to serve as an information-sharing organ as well as a forum for periodic get-togethers to exchange

knowledge, and to enable the members of this normally solitary profession to get to know one another. I worked at guitar making and repairing largely in a vacuum of excited but isolated inexperience, learning as I went along -- until 1977, in which year I joined the *G.A.L.* That was, coincidentally, the same period in which that organization was getting up steam and starting to become a point of common reference for the loosely unified brotherhood of workers such as I was -- which included makers of guitars of all types, mandolins, ukuleles, lutes and other early instruments, harps, dulcimers, oddball experimental instruments, harpsichords, balalaikas, etc., and anybody else (except violin makers, who had long ago formed their own societies) who fancied any version of, or approach to, such work.

The arc of my growing up as a luthier is, as a matter of fact, intimately connected to the *G.A.L.* I cannot overstate how important this organization was for me, personally and professionally, for the 34 years that I was a member: it helped to give me an identity. As I said, I became a member in 1977 (at the same time that my world was turned upside down at the Carmel Classic Guitar Festival that I've written separately about. That event was a seismic shock, but it was a one-time event; the *G.A.L.*, on the other hand, was there decade after decade). As a new member I was a young guy who didn't know very much and had a lot of questions. Gradually and unexpectedly over the years, as tracked by my participating in one *G.A.L.* convention after another, I grew into someone who had figured out some things and whose opinions carried weight. Having been asked more questions as the years went on by more and more people who knew less than I did, I've more or less become a source of information for others who were/are at an earlier stage of their own development. At the same time there have been fewer and fewer guitar makers who knew more than I did that I could ask questions of -- at least as far as steel string guitars were concerned. I guess that must be what growing up is about and I've tried to not let it go to my head.

As I said, I pretty much grew up as a luthier on this path with the *G.A.L.* I can also say, looking back these many years, that the *G.A.L.* pretty much grew up with me. In the three and a half decades of my association I became part of the Guild by actively participating in it in every way I could. It became part of my life by providing me with a forum for teaching and writing, for trying to figure out answers to lutherie's questions, from which to be a better known luthier in general, and for the sheer companionship of similarly minded folks. And along the way the Guild grew from a modest grouping of anachronists to an organization with members all over the world who relied on it for information. I severed my affiliation with the *G.A.L.* and Tim Olsen in 2010; but, as I said, we had more or less grown up together.

The Guild's early Conventions were mostly organized and run by Tim, his wife, and his brother- and sister-in-law. Tim was at that time making stringed instruments along with the rest of us -- although he eventually gave that work up as he was running the Guild full-time and getting his salary from doing so. He and his office-team also worked above and beyond the call of duty by publishing the Guild's newsletter. This was originally a rather modest folio, and it has since grown into today's impressive glossy-and-full-color-page American Lutherie Quarterly. Simply tracking the early headquarters' segue from its unassuming beginnings, with primitive printing equipment, to growing into a modern printing and publishing enterprise that handles photography and advertising and editing, publishes magazines and books, organizes Conventions, keeps up with correspondence and billing, and meets deadlines and a payroll . . . has been an amazing treat. Given that all that started out with literally nothing but youth, energy, and a vision, it's at least as real an accomplishment as most of the rest of us have ever achieved.

The first G.A.L. Conventions were loosely organized and informal. To give you a sense of how modestly this all began, the first Convention I attended was in Tacoma in 1977. Accommodations were tents and sleeping bags (that we brought with us!) in Tim Olsen's parents' back yard -- with majestic Mount Shasta looming on the horizon. Everyone shared the one bathroom that they had and I remember the absolute lack of hot water by the time it was my turn to take a shower. But we were young and excited and our backs weren't yet bothered by sleeping on the ground. A few members had already made guitars for *known musicians* or *written something that got published* and we were impressed as all getout by being in their company.

Tim Olsen's idea seems to have been, from the beginning, that the Guild should be an information-sharing organization above anything else. This idea was refined, over the course of the first few Conventions, by these events' increasingly in-house direction. The Conventions had been open to the public in the first years, but it was generally felt that the time and effort the exhibitors' spent trying to sell guitars to the public interfered with their equally strong desire to talk with, get to know, learn from, and teach one another. Public hours and private conversations don't mix; so, public participation and attendance was discontinued and the scheduling was filled instead with lectures, workshops, demonstrations, tutorials, panel discussions, display opportunities for all kinds of new work, and even the occasional formal display of someone's private collection of interesting stringed instruments. It wasn't that the public was excluded, really; the Conventions simply weren't publicly advertised and non-luthiers never became aware of these events.

EARLY GROWTH PAINS

Along with this coalescing of identity, of course, came problems of growth. First of all, the *G.A.L.* had incorporated itself as a non-profit and had acquired a Board of Directors. Tim was *de facto* running the Guild, and officially doing it as the Board's employee. Second of all, wonderful though the *G.A.L.* Conventions were -- and at first they had been annual events alternating in location between both coasts and the Midwest -- the sheer amount of organizational work it took soon rendered them into every-other-year West-Coast-only events. While this was a convenience for us West-Coast luthiers it didn't do much for the East Coast membership. But the Guild was thriving anyway: there was that much popular interest in this new craft.

Selling one's work is too powerful a motivation to deny entirely, however, and by the middle 1980s the Guild's Board of Directors was at least as business-minded as it was education-in-crafts minded. It wanted the organization to become more a more actively commercial forum for promoting guitars, both factory-made as well as hand made. It also wished to put the Guild on a more business-efficient footing and cut costs by outsourcing a lot of the work that Tim Olsen & his staff had been doing. Part of this thrust was a sense that the Guild should have some East-Coast presence to re-enfranchise the East-Coast membership; the Board members were mostly East Coast based at that time, so this was understandable. Tim, as an employee of the Board, was asked to make this happen. Yet, his concept of the Guild, as I said, had been information-centered and based in catering to the needs of the membership in general in an in-house way -- without competing with production-made guitars, and without hiring the lowest bidders to edit and publish the newsletter and run the conventions, and certainly without commercial agendas. The matter was also complicated by the fact that Tim was going to be out of a job, or at least demoted. These differences in commercial outlook, geographic interests, and personal advantage/disadvantage ensured that a power struggle for control of the Guild would inevitably follow. It did. And it became nasty. What should have remained an in-house difference/revolt was even written up in an investigative-journalism style article in *Frets Magazine* and readers across the nation were treated to various halves of the story and some finger-pointing -- to be entertained, shocked, and informed by, I guess. To this day I don't know why any of those readers would have cared, one way or the other.

THE BREECH-BIRTH OF A.S.I.A.

I wasn't part of the *G.A.L.*'s internal power struggles, and I didn't know that they would eventually be resolved by the board of directors leaving the *G.A.L.* and starting a new organization. I was an involved *G.A.L.* member who simply felt very happy to be part of the only niche in the business that was for hand makers such as myself. In fact, I contributed a long Letter to the Editor to *Frets Magazine* in the

middle of all this, in defense of Tim Olsen's purist position. I was distressed at the acrimony that was being generated and wished to be helpful in some way, largely because of my personal regard for Tim. What I did was to volunteer to act as a go-between so that I could at least convey information between the factions, without taking sides myself. I had been active enough in Guild affairs that I knew the people involved and they knew me; after all, we'd all been in the same line of work and had attended the same Conventions together. Within a relatively short time I invested eight-plus hours of my time in long-distance telephone calls to various Board members spread out through the East coast and the midwest, and Tim, hoping to find out and clarify positions and see who might have been willing to compromise, and where. (Remember, this was in the days when we were all struggling, and eight hours of long-distance bills represented some real money.)

I didn't get anywhere in particular with this effort, ultimately, except to find a surprising amount of resentment and intransigence from several of the Board members. The more vociferous ones seemed to be the spark plugs behind an effort that they saw as moving toward growth and change, and that Tim saw as a power grab. There were certainly some personal agendas and a certain amount of frustration and righteous posturing mixed up in this, disguised as business-minded savvy. But also, as I said, the Board members were mostly East Coast people, and the *G.A.L.* was becoming a West Coast based organization, so there had to be an imbalance in operation.

More significantly, the Guild had grown sufficiently and had such cash flow and reserves that it was impossible that the logic of a more commercial use for it and its resources would not enter the picture. It was highly unlikely that running and using an organization that was so successful would not, ah . . . be tempting to the more business-minded, for whom the original educational focus of the Guild would likely hold the potential for being a stepping-stone to other things. Tim, being no less rigid than the others, but much more articulate, seemed to be in possession of all the most persuasive arguments in favor of keeping the Guild noncommercial, informational, and egalitarian on the level of the membership. Also, Tim told me that he didn't understand the Board members' motives; he believed that now that the Guild was solvent for the first time they were being envious and covetous. In fact, Tim said that he suspected that had led the Board into temptation by making the *G.A.L.* so solvent and attractive a plum. Tim was correct in that he didn't understand the Board; it's likely that they didn't understand him either, for that matter. I've neglected to mention that Dick Boak, the president of the Board, had been (and was, and continues to be even now) one of the more prominent people in the management echelon of the Martin Guitar Company; no one with such a portfolio in that organization -- or any other -- would have had much interest in doing anything non-commercial. In any event, these positions were irreconcilable. Things got ugly.

At one point the Board acted unilaterally to freeze the Guild's bank accounts and deny Tim from having access to any funds. As Tim was the business manager and in charge of disbursements (including his own salary), this move was designed to be fatal. As I said, things got ugly.

In 1985-6, in the aftermath of an unsuccessful lawsuit against Tim, and a successful countersuit by him, the Board of Directors understood that it had lost the battle and jumped ship. That group very quickly started the Association of Stringed Instrument Artisans (A.S.I.A.). This is a fine organization and I've attended several of its Symposia. It is a virtual East-Coast duplication of the G.A.L. and has alleviated East Coast luthiers' need to travel across the country to attend the Guild's [by now exclusively] West Coast events. But while the G.A.L. is run by a permanent staff and caters to mostly amateurs and part-timers plus a sprinkling of experienced old-timers, A.S.I.A. has in comparison suffered from three things. First, it is based in a political business model: every few years a new Board of Directors is voted in and the direction of the organization changes. This is hell on any continuity. Second, the main reason that A.S.I.A. was even conceived of was to serve the needs of the professionally and commercially-minded segment of the lutherie population -- as I said earlier, there was a lot of Martin Guitar Organization encouragement. But there aren't enough commercially-minded members of A.S.I.A. to support a separate organization, and there never were. Thus, A.S.I.A. has become an East-coast version of the G.A.L., no more and no less, and it caters mainly to the same *enthusiast* demographic. Finally, the organization suffers from its acronym: A.S.I.A. Whenever it has advertised its gatherings A.S.I.A. symposia have attracted civilians who were under the impression that they would be viewing Korean ceramics, Japanese kimonos, and the like -- instead of guitars. As for me, I of course stayed with the G.A.L. and was even nominated for its board of directors in 1986. As I recall I came in seven votes short of actually getting on the board; I got 203 and the fifth-place elected board member, Gila Eban, got 210.

This might be a good time for me to segue into a general commentary about Boards of Directors and Chief Executive Officers. My understanding of the rationale for a Board of Directors is that it provides the equivalent of Civilian Oversight for military or political matters. You know: to give a voice to people who have a different horse in the race, so to speak. This is, in theory, good. In reality, though, it gives people who are only in a position of authority for a relatively limited amount of time impetus to use that time to do something useful, noteworthy, and DISTINCT. This, I think, particularly likely to be true with young men who have not previously had any great amount of authority over others' affairs, and have this limited window of time in which to make their mark. Note that I'm not saying any of the ideas or actions involved are good or bad: I'm identifying a natural dynamic -- which isn't helped by the fact that whoever has been at the helm the longest is likely

to resist change and new input. As in any marriage, the various partners need to be well matched if harmony is to prevail. Lamentably, I believe that such a good match is equally rare in both these areas.

A TURNING POINT FOR ME

As I said, I grew up with the Guild of American Luthiers and it grew up with me. Between 1977 and 2006 I wrote many articles for American Lutherie magazine, attended most of the conventions, gave numerous public lectures and workshops, participated in panel discussions, led guitar listening tests, donated goods and materials to the auctions, contributed support and energy of all kinds, promoted the Guild in every way I could, and dutifully renewed my membership each year. I withdrew from the G.A.L. in 2010 because of an intractable breakdown of trust with Tim Olsen. He impressed on me that, after all this time, I held no personal value for him. No one likes to be told that.

My realization of the fact that this otherwise capable man could not or would not see me as a person, but only as an object or a thing -- and with about as much value as a sackful of bottle caps at that -- actually began in 2004. And it was, weirdly enough, on the occasion of my getting triple-bypass heart surgery. I'd been scheduled to attend the G.A.L. Convention that year but I was prevented from attending at the last minute by that medical procedure. I was, in fact, flat on my back in the I.C.U. during the Convention, full of morphine and other drugs, and I stayed there for nine days. This was no mere band-aid-and-superglue job, I must say; having your chest cut open is a serious experience. It majorly limits what you can do with your body for a long time afterward. It's scary and there's pain involved. You should avoid having this experience if you can.

Ironically -- and specifically for reasons of safety and health -- I had bought a car with air bags one month before this. A friend had been in a car collision shortly before and his life had been saved by his airbags -- and I'd worried about being in an accident and being laid up because I was driving a car without that safety feature. So, as I lay in the I.C.U., with my chest wired together and tubes running into me and out of me, I could at least be thankful that I finally had air bags. To you existentialists out there I say: with a sense of humor like that, how can God be anything but a Marxist? A Groucho Marxist, that is. Anyway, I was pleased to get a note from Tim some two weeks after the Convention, as I was convalescing at home. He forwarded a poster sized get-well card that had been signed by a lot of the attendees, along with the information that "the Guild . . . had taken up a collection in [my] name and we were pleasantly surprised with how much had come in from that. Get well soon, Tim". Quote unquote. Short and sweet! I waited several weeks for the money to be forwarded and when nothing happened I

wrote Tim a letter saying that the moneys would be welcome: I was not working nor generating any income, and the medical bills were mounting up; so any help would be appreciated.

I cannot adequately express my surprise when Tim wrote me back a note saying: "You misunderstood what I said. We didn't take the collection up for you. We took it up for us. Get well soon. Tim." Wow. Verbatim, pro-forma, succinct, and that was it. But . . . where was there any friendship or even basic human acknowledgement in this? Tim had, in fact, just told me that they were pleased with the money they'd collected, using *my* name as leverage. Without asking me. As I lay in the I.C.U. And the subtext, quite obviously, was that I wasn't getting a dime of it, and I could stop bothering him now because I'd never been its intended recipient in the first place. (Well, okay, I did get the signed card. But I never did get a dollar of actual help, or even genuine sympathy. You *do* understand my consternation, do you not?)

Having expected *something* at least minimally personal after having known Tim and been a contributive member of the G.A.L. for (at that point) twenty-seven years, I felt slighted, dismissed, betrayed and, quite frankly, dehumanized. I called Tim up a few days afterwards and asked him how he could do something so insensitive and thoughtless? Whatever response I might have expected, though, I instead found that it hadn't registered on Tim that I'd have any feelings about this. He certainly didn't seem to have any feelings of his own about the episode; it simply didn't make a blip on his radar. He very matter-of-factly explained that he hadn't instigated the collection; rather, one of the G.A.L. members had gotten up during the convention's auction event and announced that I would have wanted to raise some money for the Guild if I'd been there, so how would people feel about chipping in some donations? The money had been raised for the Guild and not me, Tim went on, and if he had offended me through some personal failing he was sorry. As far as he was concerned this whole thing represented nothing more than a procedural glitch -- the kind of thing set a bad precedent for auction running -- and he would see to it that it didn't happen again. The most appalling thing was how impersonally and matter-of-factly Tim told me all this: as though the episode had nothing to do with him and I was expected to say something like, "oh, o.k., why didn't you say so in the first place? Thanks so much". Personal failing indeed; it was a callous failure of empathy. And *cheap*. As I remember, I'd even donated a bunch of stuff to be sold at that same auction.

THE RESPONSIVE GUITAR BOOK PROJECT

My association with the Guild limped along somewhat after that memorable event but, like my body, never really regained full youthful vigor. I attended one

more Convention but my heart (no pun intended) wasn't really in it. What my heart *was* in during that time, instead, was writing my book about guitar making.

More on that in Part 2.