

## THE G.A.L., HEALSDBURG, N.C.A.L., AND ME

### PART 2

I left off Part 1 of this narrative by mentioning that, in 2004, there had been a growing distance between me and Tim Olsen and the G.A.L., and that I'd managed to fill the void with writing my book. I'd actually begun to write that in 2002 but I hadn't realized at the time how it would come to dominate my life -- which it did, increasingly, until well into 2009. As far as my heart surgery of 2004 was concerned I think that having had a fender-bender with mortality helped motivate me to get that enormous project completed. And it was enormous. I described my experiences of writing that book and trying to get it published, in a separate article titled "My Adventures in Book Publishing". I would previously have submitted this to the G.A.L. for eventual publication, but that organization didn't really feel like my friend any longer. I put it on my website instead.

The thing about my book -- which is actually a two-volume set -- is that it's differently organized and more comprehensive than any of the other books available at this time on the subject of instrument making. I have written about the *whys*, *whens*, *whats*, *wheres*, *how muches*, *how do we know this*, and *what ifs* as well as the *hows*, and included comparative, theoretical, experimental, aesthetic, personal, scientific, philosophical, and historical-developmental information that is nowhere else available. Those of you who have seen my book(s) know what I'm talking about. But, initially, my writing was going to catch a few people off guard with its unique way of presenting information, as well as the amount of it. I asked one of my students, who understands my thinking, to write a book review at the time of publication and submit it to the G.A.L. He did so. When the review hadn't appeared more than a year later, he got in touch with Tim to ask when he might expect to see it; Tim said that he had decided to have someone else write a different review instead. Based in a third party conversation, I think that Tim never read my student's submission. But either way, again: no thanks, no explanation, no apology; just a cold fiat.

That alternative review eventually appeared. While being pretty much on the mark, it had neglected to mention several elements that I felt would have been worth pointing out. The reviewer -- one of the newer G.A.L. staff, it turned out -- doesn't seem to ever have been a guitar maker. I wrote a Letter To The Editor in response, pointing out the things that I felt were important that had been omitted. This led, very shortly, to two bizarre and unsatisfying telephone conversations (and several similar emails) with Tim. To my dismay, he seemed uninterested in my

feelings or opinions about the G.A.L.'s review of my books, and he urged me, *as a friend*, to drop any response to it. But Tim had already shown me what kind of a friend he was (I mean, let's face it: he'd dropped me like a hot potato when I was flat on my back in the hospital and of no discernible use to him) and I was getting an added strong whiff of what felt like personal disapproval and disdain. I had said in my Letter to the Editor that, nearing seventy and having a bad heart, these books were likely to be my legacy. Tim's response to that was to tell me how dare I say such a thing? He really did. He obviously thought that I was playing the impaired-heart card as some kind of sleazy manipulation for sympathy; for my part, I began to think that Tim can't tell the difference between sympathy for a fellow human being and a disease, and that he finds both equally distasteful. I had also pointed out that my books, besides being chock-full of useful and pertinent information, represented the nicest visual and user-friendly product that I could put out: hard-cover, bound so that one could open the book out flat on the workbench without breaking the spine, with high quality glossy paper, color photos, nice dust jackets, font sized for the reading ability of the many grey-haired luthiers among us, and a special embossed slipcase. I added that, in Japan, they don't call me a *crass act* for nothing. But I don't think Tim appreciated that either.

Subsequent communication was unproductive. One particularly bizarre exchange has stayed with me, that resulted from my asking Tim what was he thinking to treat a long-term supporter like me so offhandedly. I don't think he understood my question at all; he instead quite floored me by saying that "you have lots of friends; you've got a thousand friends; so why do you want approval from me?" Yes, he said exactly that. And he went on: "I'm not one of you: I'm not a guitar maker any longer" and again added: "so why do you want approval from me?". That's word for bizarre word. (*Approval?* Dude: how about just basic *acknowledgement?*) I replied, quite honestly, that if he had to ask I didn't think I could tell him. I was certainly at a loss for words for the kind of person who would come up with an administrative distinction such as the fact that I make guitars while he no longer does -- and try to use it 30+ years into things as a reason for distancing himself from me. That was surreal, to say the least: here I'd written two really good books about guitar making, as well as put out a DVD about voicing the guitar -- which the G.A.L. has ignored -- and was, once again put in the position of feeling very much like a non-person.

## THE END OF THE ROAD

I must say that was a real low point for me. While getting such a load of cold-shouldering didn't quite reduce my world to ashes (the Oakland Hills fire of 1991 actually did do that), the discovery of such a vast pool of hostile narcissism shocked me and stung like hell. It still hurts. I should add that by "narcissism" I

mean the condition of someone's lacking the capacity or desire to take someone else's reality into account. "Hostile" is what it felt like to me: I got the sense that Tim enjoyed putting me in my place.

So, to sum up: I had rendered Tim and his organization many services, and I'd done them gladly and for free. But when all was said and done I was unable to detect an echoing of reciprocity, or even just basic regard; I was instead on the receiving end of a style of withholding from, and barely-concealed contempt for, someone in a subordinate position. Indeed, Tim's style seems to be to make people feel helpless. I mean, the flip side of "I'm not one of you" is clearly "you're not one of us", right? At my most bitter, I thought that as the *G.A.L.* had served as the virtual Alma Mater within which I formed my social and intellectual identity as a luthier -- and it really had -- then that venerable institution, with Tim at its head, was really feeling like dear old F.U. In any event the door felt firmly closed to any input from me and I gave up hope of any reconciliation. I withdrew from membership in the *G.A.L.*

But be all that as it may, enough of that. With the conversations that I just referred to being the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back, and my renewing my membership in the *G.A.L.* being firmly out of the question, then this might also be a good time to take a broader look at matters of splitting off and going off on one's own in general.

Such actions are interesting in both the abstract and the specific if only because life is FULL of these kinds of things. Growth in most areas of adult life is, in fact, inseparable from a debit of some kind. Gain, pain of loss, learning, acquiring perspective, differentiating, fulfillment, success, moving on, failure, maturation and disintegration are all sort of a package-deal thing that is further spiced and flavored by the fact that personal betrayal is the kind of thing that people kill each other about. The key to surviving it all is: can you learn anything from any of it? A case in point in this matter of splits and divisions is the origin of Healdsburg Guitar Festival -- whose beginning, in fact, came out of very much the same kind of split as the A.S.I.A.- *G.A.L.* one that I've described. The Healdsburg Guitar Festival (which is a close version of the *G.A.L./A.S.I.A.* Board of Directors' original idea of the kind of show that the *G.A.L.* should have been promoting) came out of a split within The Northern California Association of Luthiers. Let me explain what this was all about.

## **THE BIRTH OF REGIONAL LUTHERIE ACTIVITY**

In the beginning, as I said above, one of the things that made the early *G.A.L.* conventions so great was that their venues rotated between both coasts and the Midwest; however, the sheer amount of organizational work it took eventually rendered them into every-other-year West-Coast-only events. This scheduling came

with an obvious plus and a minus for the West Coast members: we wouldn't have to spend a lot of money on airplane tickets and shipping guitars to events on the opposite coast. But we'd have to wait two years between events on our own. On the one hand this alternating-year schedule eventually worked just fine for A.S.I.A. because it would be able to schedule its Symposiums (Symposia?) so as to alternate with G.A.L. Conventions. On the other hand, a West Coast event-vacuum was created. In 1992 the first American REGIONAL luthiers' organization -- something that people could drive to instead of having to buy a plane ticket for -- was created to fill it: this was the Northern California Association of Luthiers (N.C.A.L.).

(NOTE: By the way, the G.A.L. Conventions and the A.S.I.A. Symposia are of course both events at which people gather. The difference is etymological and a matter of, shall we say, focus. A *Convention* is from the Latin *con + venire*, meaning *with + come* or *coming*, as in a *coming together with . . .* *Symposium*, on the other hand, is from the Greek *sym + potein* (or *posein*), meaning *with or together* (as in *symbiosis*), and *potein* (or *posein*), meaning *drink* or *liquid* (as in *potion*, *potable*, *potage*, or *Poseidon*, the God of the seas). So to go to a Convention is to gather together for any particular reason, and talk; to go to a Symposium is to have a drinking party and have a convivial time.)

Painful and acrimonious as the G.A.L./A.S.I.A. split was, it was also a fertilizing influence on lutherie work in the rest of the country. It freed up time and territory for others. N.C.A.L. was created to fill the time gap between West Coast lutherie conventions. The bi-annual scheduling of A.S.I.A.'s Symposia created a similar vacuum and opportunity on the East coast. Local and regional groups had the opportunity to coalesce and carry on the work of both organizations in smaller doses, and to give continuing support and educational opportunities to members who lived reasonably nearby. The same happened in the geography in the middle, as exemplified by the Luthier's Invitational of North Texas (L.I.N.T.), which is still going strong. The G.A.L. had created lots of aficionados who could and would do better as part of a local group that met every so often, than by working isolatedly in their garages and basements and going to a convention every two years.

### **N.C.A.L.**

Getting back to NCAL, I was one of its five original founding members -- although our group didn't have a name at first; we were just guitar nerds getting together. The others were Marc Silber, Steve Newberry, Brian Burns, and Pat Smith. This was in 1992. While our initial group was small and happy to meet informally, we soon found that there others within driving distance who were happy to also show up. So, we needed a name, and in 1993 came up with BASSIC -- the

Bay Area Society of Stringed Instrument Crafters. One of our members, Colin Kaminsky, came up with that.

Pretty soon, even more people joined us. Northern California hosts just about as many independent instrument makers as the greater Portland, Oregon, area does. But while Portland has had its own handmade musical instrument show for decades, BASSIC yet lacked the cohesion of the Oregonian lutherie community. We had to create it. And, if we were going to do so, that cohesion was going to be achieved by BASSIC becoming a greater-than-simply-local organization; I mean, the Bay Area is larger than Portland. We accomplished this in several ways. First, it didn't hurt that we were the only game in town. And we were all-inclusive: no one was turned away. We had bi-monthly meetings with scheduled presenters and Show-And-Tell opportunities -- and had a regular newsletter (that was my personal project; I kept it going almost single-handedly for two years). Meetings were rotated to anyone's shop who was willing to host the next meeting, so we roamed the region meeting-wise, from Santa Cruz to Healdsburg. This is a span that represents a three-hour-long car ride; we've been able to have meetings in Berkeley, Oakland, Lafayette, San Francisco, Felton, Petaluma, Martinez, and more.

We had plenty of enthusiastic members and within the first years of our excited growth we organized two full-blown handmade musical instrument shows in the Bay Area, as well as a third show in tandem with the main local crafts community organization. For the former we all chipped in, both exhibitions were great (with programs that had paid advertisements!) and we managed to break even on both events! We were quite proud, and justifiably so. By the way, I mentioned that BASSIC was the first regional lutherie organization, and I also said that Portland has had its annual musical instrument show for many years. The Portland show is institutional; as far as I know, it's run by the local Forestry Center but there's no separate regional luthier's organization that co-produces or operates independently of it.

Then, as we were growing into genuinely regional organization, it was time to find a name that better reflected that reality. One of the rejects was *the Professional Luthier's Union of Northern California*. One might think that this strong-sounding name would capture the aspirations and breadth of our organization, but its acronym, PLUNC, somehow didn't project as much, uh, sheer string-instrument-making professionalism as we'd have liked. So we eventually settled on the ordinary-sounding NCAL: the Northern California Association of Luthiers.

I must say that NCAL has had a nice, long run. We had "Presidents" for some years (I was President for a while), but we eventually found that we could function

pretty well without . . . ummm . . . adult supervision. NCAL is 20 years old at the time of this writing and is still going strong, in spite of the fact that none of us early members are very active in the organization any longer. The work has been taken on by others; at present the secretary-ship (which handles alerts for stuff for sale, date and place of the next meeting, announcements, notices of looking for help or services, etc.) is being handled by L.M.I., one of the two leading American lutherie supply houses. And the mailing list for this first American *regional* luthier's group is up to about 400 members! Most meetings attract 20 to 40 people, usually from the area nearest the current meeting place.

## THE HEALDSBURG GUITAR SHOW

And now we approach the time and reasons for the split that I mentioned. While NCAL happily chugged along as an informal and information-sharing community event, some of its members -- primarily those for whom this *was* their day job, who were building or planned to build in greater quantity, and who were looking for a way to market their work -- wanted something a bit more ambitious than a communal barbecue event as the year's high point. People being people, economics being economics, and human restlessness and entrepreneurism being what they are, there was NO WAY that something like this was not going to sooner or later come up for discussion. And these entrepreneurs were now ready for a money-making event. Welcome to Capitalism, and all that.

The matter was debated back and forth at NCAL meetings without much resolution -- just as happens in City Council meetings and labor-management negotiating sessions all over the world. After a while it became clear that agreement by consensus was never going to be reached in time to prepare for a Summer show, so three brave hotheads -- Tom Ribbecke, Charles Fox, and Todd Taggart (founder of L.M.I.) -- took the bull by the horns and simply went ahead and took it on themselves to find a venue and organize a handmade musical instrument event. As these worthies were living and working in Healdsburg (about an hour North of San Francisco), the Healdsburg Guitar Festival was born. It did have a bit of community and Chamber of Commerce support, but these three men actually started the festival that has by now become the premier handmade guitar show in this country. I take off my hat to them, and the greater lutherie community owes them: they created something important.

Fast-forward some years: the Healdsburg show, like the G.A.L. conventions, is now bi-annual. There's simply too much work in organizing and running a commercial show. On the one hand, there is all the paperwork to be managed, as well as fees, security, correspondence, budgeting, organizing presentations and coordinating lectures and events, food catering, listening tests, sound equipment,

physical setup and take-down, showrooms and sales rooms, advertising, getting sponsors, publishing a program-magazine (and coordinating the photographs, biographies and ads), deadlines, waiting lists, etc. etc. etc. On the other hand are the problems of growth: The Healdsburg festival has outgrown available facilities in that city and now takes place in Santa Rosa;. As a matter of fact, the festival has outgrown its first Santa Rosa location and is now in its second one. The Healdsburg Festival is run by L.M.I. Inc. and I doubt that these folks find it a big money-maker after all the costs are paid out. I'm grateful to them for taking this complicated task on; I mean, it's not as though they have nothing else to do the rest of the time: they're running a complex business.

[Parenthetically, for those of you who don't know, L.M.I. (Luthier's Mercantile, International) is one of this nation's three largest lutherie supply and materials outlets; the others are the Stewart-MacDonald Company and Allied Lutherie, which Todd Taggard left L.M.I. to found. Both the G.A.L. conventions and the A.S.I.A. symposia have performed the additional and valuable commercial service to the lutherie community of giving these supply houses -- as well as other independent vendors -- a forum for meeting their customers face to face and make sales. Regardless of which exhibiting guitar maker sells or doesn't sell anything at any show, the suppliers always sell stuff.]

It's interesting for me to view the parallels between the two organizational splits that I've described. In each case their genesis was rooted in very similar economic and ambitious realities: things had reached a point at which someone thought there was money to be made. But one event was handled like a train crash -- with drama, struggle for power, accusations, and lawsuits. The other was more like a fairly easy birthing in which the midwife mostly kept her hands off, and allowed neither mother nor child to be much damaged by the experience. Of course, there was a real treasury involved in the former, and Tim was going to get demoted (and perhaps ousted) from an organization that he'd helped found. As I said, welcome to Capitalism.

## **WRAPPING IT UP**

To sum up, I've been a significant part of and participant in the above organizations and movements; this includes many years of memberships, writing articles (and books), showing my guitars at many events, and many educational experiences and opportunities of all types. I'm happy to have been a founding member of the first regional lutherie organization. And if anyone ever writes a comprehensive history of the first generation of American luthiers my narrative will be part of that. The divorce from the G.A.L. does leave me with an ache that's not likely to ever go completely away. My distancing myself from it -- and in its

director's having most emphatically distanced himself from me -- has been a mutual loss. I mean, it's loss for the Guild too. But, three and a half decades into this, I need to be met with more than just name, rank, serial number, it's time to renew your dues, and we'll let you know if we need something -- which was pretty much how it was. And even now (at least as of October 2012) my books are not found on the G.A.L.'s website list of Recommended Lutherie Books.

I must confess that I've obsessed about finding a way to understand Tim. To the extent that I have managed to do so, this is based in several things. First, those of you who have seen the movie "The Silence of the Lambs" may remember the scene in which psychiatrist-turned-killer Hannibal Lecter is talking with F.B.I. agent Clarice Starling about the character structure of a serial killer (identified as 'Buffalo Bill') who is being hunted by the F.B.I.; and he asks her: *what are his needs?* Just so with Tim, although I must say that it was quite some time before I was able to see my situation in terms of Tim's *need* to behave so as to make others feel insignificant. And second: where would he have learned this? Well, it can only be from being treated like that himself, by his earliest authority figure: his father. It is my assumption that Tim is telling the world, through his behaviors, the story of how he was treated by an unsupportive, withholding, and belittling caretaker when he was young and incapable of defending himself. It is likely also (this is how it works, folks) the essence of how he treats himself, family, and his employees. People behave as they've been behaved to; I see traces of all kinds of my own early formative influences carried out in my own daily actions. And I think my own contribution to this failure is in part that, for reasons of my own, I needed to believe in Tim in spite of ongoing evidence that didn't justify such an effort. Well, we all have our limitations, but I belatedly managed to learn something about myself from this. I have to tell you: compared to the cost of life experience, my guitars are cheap.

Finally, outside of all this, and my personal feelings aside, I know that Tim Olsen's accomplishment is to have devoted most of his life to keeping the Guild of American Luthiers going and successfully viable. To have kept such a vital organization alive for so long is a significant accomplishment and one that I would never have been able to carry through had I had that responsibility. As I said earlier on, instrument making by individuals started out from nothing in the United States, and the Guild of American Luthiers put it on the map, made it accepted, familiar, and even respectable. I wouldn't be where I am, and able to tell this story, if it hadn't been for the G.A.L.. Tim needs to be given credit for that. I furthermore believe that Tim was right in maintaining control of the direction of the Guild way back then, rather than surrendering the organization that he helped start to the we're-on-the-board-of-directors-for-four-years-and-we're-going-to-make-some-changes folks who went on to form A.S.I.A. -- although I can appreciate with hindsight that he did, just as much as anything else, seem to see the Board's

behaviors moralistically, as something tinged with the sinfulness of being unable to stand up to temptation. Tim's statements to me at the time suggested that. More recently his disapproval of me for *daring* to make public mention of personal weaknesses (i.e., my age and health) likewise suggests perception of a certain depleted moral fiber on my part.

As far as A.S.I.A. by itself goes, it is an organization that for all its good points has been so riven by disorganization, internal strife, and financial problems that I believe that the Guild would have long ago folded under such leadership (industrialist guitar maker Bob Taylor, who was with A.S.I.A. from the beginning, was from the outset of the opinion that it was an unnecessary organization). And I would have lost out on the relationship I had with the Guild and its various events between then and when I finally withdrew from it. At the same time, I am hopeful that A.S.I.A. will thrive; I like and admire it; it's worthwhile; and it's recently come under the direction of David Nichols (of Custom Pearl Inlay), who has a good head on his shoulders and some real business savvy.

Otherwise, things change and nothing is permanent. The Newport/Miami guitar show that was luthier Julius Borges' brainchild, and which eventually became the Miami-Newport show, has come and gone away. Ditto the long-running Long Island Guitar Show. The Montreal Guitar Show and the Woodstock Guitar Invitational are here now to keep the Healdsburg Guitar Festival company, while other smaller shows have come and gone. The Northern California Association of Luthiers (NCAL) and the Luthiers' Invitational of North Texas (LINT) are alive and well, as are other groupings that I hear about but haven't met with yet. I don't go to G.A.L. Conventions any more, but I continue to make guitars, write articles for other publications, teach, and show up at other shows and festivals. I hope to see you at one of them.