

Guitar maker rocks industry with aluminum bodies

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Jim Normandy designs and manufactures an award-winning guitar that's both sleek and sensible. It's strong enough to be compared to an aircraft and cool enough that its users include cult favorites Frank Black of the Pixies and Billy Zoom of X.

Yet when performing, the man who wants to make Oregon a guitar-making Mecca occupies a different part of the stage.

"I'm actually a bass player," said the Salem-based Normandy. "I started out thinking I wanted to make aluminum basses, but, well, there aren't a lot of bass players around. The guitar market is a lot bigger."

It's big enough that Normandy, in his first year of regular production, hopes to pass \$1 million in sales. He plans to move 50 guitars per month at a retail price of \$1,999. They are, he says, the world's first aluminum archtop model. Archtop guitars are known for their hollow bodies, curved tops and smooth sounds.

Normandy's goals are ambitious but not unrealistic, given the cache his line has quickly collected. He's flying high from the "best of show" honors given to the ATB-SB Aluminum-Body Guitar at June's National Association of Music Merchants convention. Along with Black and Zoom, he's close to landing an agreement with pop-metal favorites Queens of the Stone Age.

On top of the other selling points, his hollow-body chrome and powder-coated guitars are made of recycled aluminum.

"Even the neck is a fast-growing maple," he said. "People use a lot of rare wood from rain forests to make their guitars. That these are sustainable is an excellent bonus."

Normandy's guitars are nothing if not distinctive. Rivets on the back signal their unusual composition, which yield a full sound that belies their aluminum material. The guitars come in nine colors, including "School Bus," which sports the vehicles' yellow and black luster.

Body-wise, the guitars resemble those made by Gretsch or the Gibson company's ES models. The difference is they're light and, thanks partly to a fretboard that expands as players move up the neck, easy to wield.

Normandy, a financial consultant who plans to soon go full-time with the guitar-making gig, boasts a simple business model designed to help him generate 30 percent margins on his instruments.

"The overwhelming theme is, no employees," he said, noting that he subs out his manufacturing within the Zephyr Engineering plant in Salem. "By being the owner and manager of these places, I can still come out at the 30 percent margin rate that makes this viable."

He also runs a lean marketing machine, relying mainly on word of mouth from his well-known sponsoring artists.

He'll need all the good words he can get. Nationally, guitar sales dropped by 9.6 percent, to \$1.1 billion during 2006, the latest year for which the trade publication Music Trades magazine offers statistics. Guitars within Normandy's \$1,601 to \$2,000 price range comprised fewer than 1 percent of all guitars sold.

Oregon isn't home to many instrument makers. The last time the state employment department counted, in 2000, only 19 companies employed 242 workers.

However, some of those companies enjoy good reputations among their users. The Sierra Steel Guitar Company in Mollala is nationally known as a top-notch lap- and pedal-steel maker. And the David G. Monette Corp. in Portland counts Wynton Marsalis among its trumpet clientele.

Monette, who's been in business for 25 years, says it's tough going out there for all instrument companies. Brass, for instance,

has jumped from 80 cents a pound in 2003 to nearly \$5 this year.

Regardless, he's working to fill two years worth of orders.

"But from a business standpoint, no one doing high-end instruments makes any money at it," said Monette, whose company makes six horns a month that sell for between \$7,800 and \$13,000. "If you want to get rich, become a doctor or computer software maker. You better be doing it because you love to do it."

Normandy indeed loves his sideline, which he expects to soon become a full-time job.

"As soon as I can, I'm doing it," he said about his impending move. "The orders are coming in so fast that it'll be the only viable thing to do."

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Jim Normandy's new guitar recently won best in show honors at a national music merchants convention.