

Ken Powell applying bracing.

# Ken Powell

Don't be fooled by the soft curves and the 'smiley face' design. These guitars are the result of years of research, innovation and elbow grease by a dedicated craftsman. But wow, they look fun to play.



**W**hen semi-pro guitarist Ken Powell couldn't find the right factory-made guitar for his fingerpicking style, he took the innovator's route and decided to build his own. He bought wood and tools and thoroughly researched the subject. Most novice makers would stop there, but not Our Ken.

'I joined the Guild of American Luthiers,' he recalls. 'It's a non-profit-making knowledge-sharing organisation, and I bought all their Big Red Books for the last 20 years. I can recommend it to anyone looking for inspiration and answers to many questions and problems. Their quarterly journals cover all types of stringed-instrument making. There's an incredible amount of info out there and it's amazing how contradictory they are as well. What one person swears by, another states is a

load of rubbish – literally!'

Ken studied the work of classical-guitar redesigner Dr Michael Kasha, and the vibrating plate theories of Chladni patterns, and developed a bracing pattern that eventually evolved into the design he now uses. This design is founded on the rocking motion of the bridge when the string is plucked, and the structural braces and tone bars radiating from it.

'With my design I get more sustain, better across-string balance, greater projection and a piano-like sweetness to the tone,' he begins. 'It takes longer to make than the standard factory-produced 'X' bracing, regardless of whether the bracing is advertised as 'scalloped', which is sometimes advertised as better design. If this is so, why not make all guitars like this? The 'X' brace was developed around 100 years ago and it works fine, but with the technology available today I couldn't just sit back and accept it. I needed to find out if I could get that extra 1% or 2% out of the string energy before it was lost in heat transfer.

I'm sure there will be many traditionalists who will disagree, but it works for me.'

Ken's guitars are intended primarily for fingerstyle players, and are lightly built with light-gauge strings (.012 to .053). Before accepting a commission, Ken likes to see and hear a potential customer play, and if he sees a heavy-handed player, a plectrum player or simply a player who wants medium gauge strings, he'll take that into consideration when deciding top stiffness and bracing height and stiffness.

'I also offer a choice of neck widths and thicknesses for different hand size and playing technique,' he adds. 'I put a classical-width neck on one of my steel strings for a customer with very large hands.'

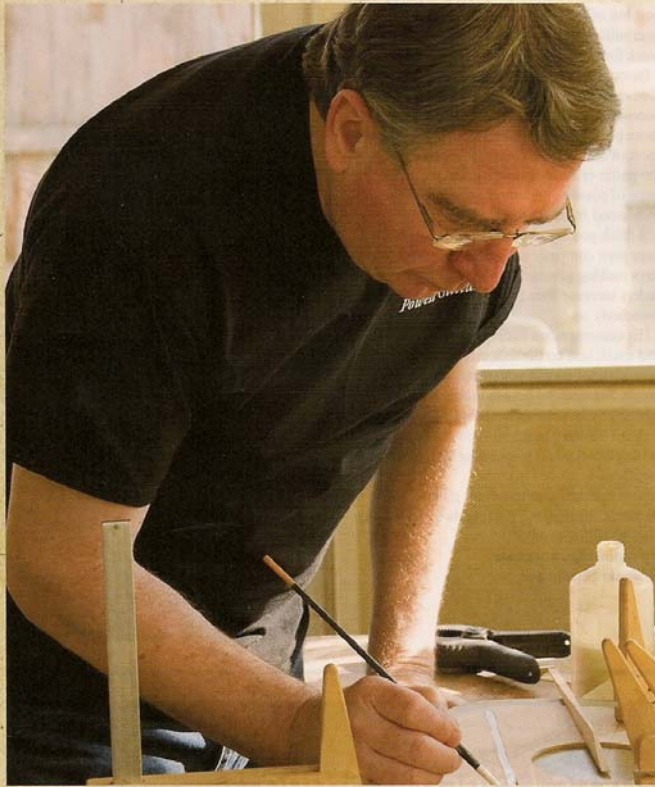
Ken's choice of wood for the top is Sitka spruce, an excellent conductor of sound with a high strength-to-weight ratio. It's well suited to the steel strings, though it can take longer

to mature and mellow. In other words, it needs to be played. Ken has also made tops from Engelmann spruce, western red cedar and one 'outrageously loud' guitar made from redwood. The back and sides are usually Indian rosewood.

'I feel the density of rosewood helps with sustain and projection, which is not to be confused with volume,' he explains. 'A less dense wood could have 'close by' volume but not project as much. I've also used Brazilian rosewood, Madagascar

rosewood, bubinga, cocobolo and an amazing wood originally from Central and South America but sourced from Malaysia called monkey pod, a truly wonderful wood in many ways, giving a softer tone than rosewood.'

**"Ken applies a French polish of blonde dewaxed shellac, a natural and traditional product extracted from the secretion of the lac beetle. It's a time-consuming process, but it helps the wood to breathe..."**



The soft grain tones of Monkey Pod.



French polishing in action



'An American luthier told the tale of a survey being held in the local shopping mall. They stopped a guitar builder and asked him what he'd do if he won the lottery. He answered, "I'd keep building guitars until the money ran out." Hand-built guitars are made by hand, not by machines.'



And what is 'tone', exactly?  
 'Tone is a matter of personal preference, playing styles and the room you're playing in!' he suggests. 'One guitar that's praised for its tone will be slated by a different player. Just like this interview - I hope it's informative and educational, but it's my thoughts, experience and passion, which is also difficult to put into words. For me, it's a transparent depth and piano-like quality coupled with warmth and "zing".'  
 Ken has found it difficult to source top-

quality woods in the UK, so he buys his Sitka spruce from Alaska Specialty Woods and his hardwoods from Luthiers Mercantile and Allied Lutherie, both in California. Once the bare wood guitar is built, Ken applies a French polish of blonde dewaxed shellac, a natural and traditional product extracted from the secretion of the lac beetle. It's a time-consuming process, but it helps the wood to breathe and gives a pleasant soft gloss to the finished instrument.  
 'The modern factory finishes are two-pack plastic or epoxy-based,' he declares. 'They give an unnatural mirror-like appearance - which looks great on a shop wall for budding magpies. A sprayed guitar can be ready in a week. French polishing can take me up to a month before it's ready for strings.'  
 At this point you may be losing sight of the advantages of a luthier-made guitar over a factory instrument, but Ken is happy to point out some of the benefits.  
 'Factory guitars are all built the same regardless of wood type and stiffness,' he continues. 'They're all thickened, braced and constructed the same. They're overbuilt to

## LUTHIER'S CORNER



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make sure they don't return to the factory, and they're made at cost per unit, which is what they need to survive. The successful companies like Taylor produce guitars with thought to new design, new production techniques, sustainable woods, local woods etc, but there are others who are producing guitars with laminated back and sides with a printed grain pattern and plastic fingerboards and bridges, and still charging around £800. I think this is sad and not the way to progress. A hand-built guitar is made with much more emphasis on getting the

best out of the wood being worked, and not overbuilt. Yes, it is expensive but we cannot work for nothing. Long hours are needed.'

Being a luthier is not a cushy vocation, and Ken currently works alone with no desire to become a 'guitar factory'. He's able to offer a more personal level of customer service than most of the majors, as well as a guarantee that the guitar is a handmade instrument 'without a trace of plastic', and the chance to choose your own wood from his stock.

'I think you have to be comfortable with your own company and enjoy spending your days making sawdust,' he sighs. 'But if my orders increase then I would consider taking somebody on.'

His customers are mainly singer-songwriters and musicians on the folk circuit, with a sprinkling of people who just love the acoustic guitar. But does he get emotional when a customer takes one of his babies out the door?

'Yes I do, very much so. You can't help getting attached after spending so many hours together.'

So would he build me an air guitar?

'Hmmm,' he replies. 'It depends on how much you're willing to pay!'

[www.powellguitars.com](http://www.powellguitars.com)  
**Graham Hazelwood**



### Meet Ken

Ken will be appearing at the following events over the summer:

**6th June 2009:** Guitar Building Workshop, Wirral Festival

[www.wirralfolkonthecoast.com](http://www.wirralfolkonthecoast.com)

**18th July 2009:** Guitar Building Workshop, Saddleworth Folk Festival

[www.safra.org.uk](http://www.safra.org.uk)

**30th/31st August 2009:** Exhibiting at the Penrith Guitar Show

[www.cumbria-guitarshow.co.uk](http://www.cumbria-guitarshow.co.uk)

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