

Aust. \$8.95 (incl. GST)
N.Z. \$9.95 (incl. GST)

Issue No. 153
October 2010

\$8.95 W40
AUST WOODWORKER
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ISSN 0818-0261
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Print Post Approved
PP255003/01122



A Karmic Creation

by Gloria Banting

Looking at the photographs on these three pages, you might reasonably expect that this guitar is the result of a well planned project by an experienced craftsman.

It's difficult to believe that Brett Jones, a graphite artist and musician, ever imagined he could transform a black lacquered guitar into a carved masterpiece.

It's even harder to imagine his bikie mates — in Far North Queensland in the late 80's — taking turns in removing the original coating and being banned from the job if they damaged the wood underneath!

In 2007, I walked into the Maryborough (QLD) Art Gallery to check out the wonderful paintings and drawings in Brett's first solo exhibition, and was surprised to find the guitar standing in a corner, looking decidedly out of place.

Brett has played since he was 17 (including on stage), but finally in 2003, had to make the decision to drop his musical ambitions to concentrate on being a full-time artist.

The art may have won, but the guitar was always going to be his 'take' on blending, or fusing art and music.

'Art', he says, 'is for the eyes and music is for the ears'.

The *Cosmic Guitar* brings it all together in one object. The 'good sounding' Suzuki Country Picker electric guitar was originally covered in a hard epoxy coating — black on the back, and on the front, a sunburst pattern fading to the timber grain.

Brett took the chance that the timber would be solid and suitable for carving. His motorbike riding mates all wanted to help and were allowed to flick off the epoxy (in tiny match head size pieces) so as to avoid pulling the grain.

One slip with the knife and a mark on the timber was all it took to be banned from the job, with another bikie always keen to take over.

Brett's only previous carving experience was sitting quietly at his school desk carving the edge with a pocketknife! 'But', he says, 'it wasn't vandalising or defacing. It was real carving like on the guitar'.

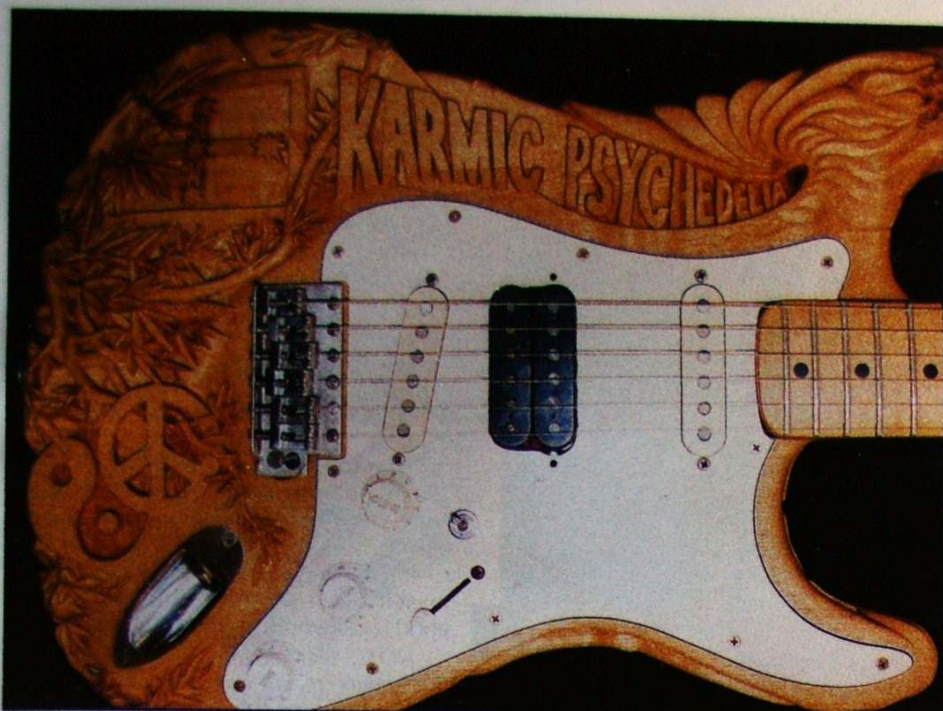
As a 20 year old fitter and turner, Brett bought a set of what he believed to be carving knives (they were actually lino knives) from a discount store in Cairns for \$10 and, amazingly, started on the guitar with no plan at all.

He had a bit of experience with wood, having 'built stuff out of wood plenty of times'. Also, with his Italian mother's side of the family up North — timber getters for generations — he always went up there on holidays, helping to fell, snig and cut up timber and sleepers with a Hagan saw and bush mill.

'Actually, they did a lot of carving and wood turning when I think about it', says Brett.

There was never a pencil line or draw-





ing on the guitar over the whole 20 years, with the carving being described as 'sub-conscious art'; the pattern just evolved.

It could not be planned as it may have taken all his life to complete with the interruptions of working 'to keep the wolves away'. The whole idea was to give himself unlimited time to finish.

The completed design shows the highs and lows of 20 years — good times and bad, yin and yang, the happy and positive sun and the sad and anguished moon.

Yin and Yang and the Peace symbol represent the spiritual, while the Eureka flag is the earthly political, national reality and his pride in being a free thinking Australian.

'1966', says Brett, is the year he 'hit the ground running', being born on Boxing Day of that year.

Some parts of the guitar design developed over time with the scroll actually being carved more than ten years before an appropriate wording came to mind.

Thou shalt have thy journey was carved while in pain after a serious accident in 1996 when a rib pierced his spine.

I asked if this was from the Bible but Brett said: 'No, it just came to me when it was time for it to be known, like the rest of the design. Also, the double meaning of the guitar itself and the journey it's been on in the time'.

The title *Karmic Psychedelia* is carved into the front, the meaning of which Brett describes as: 'Music from your formative years that burns itself deep into your soul and psyche, and makes your heart race as it rips you back through time with a few bars heard unexpectedly, years or even a lifetime later'.

The guitar was left intact for as long as possible while carving progressed, to allow it to still be played. Once dismantled, it stayed apart for years. The neck was removed so the headstock could be reshaped from the chunky 50's profile to the slimmer 60's shape and the body



carved right up to the neck mounting without damaging it.

Both front and back are carved since Brett believes they both are equally important. As much wood as possible was removed without changing the original Stratocaster shape or destroying its structural integrity.

No carving vice was used, the guitar being simply held in Brett's lap as he sat on the floor for up to six hours a day or all night till dawn.

He later graduated to the relative comfort of an old Holden car seat.

The 'blood, sweat and tears' were real as he slipped and stabbed himself many times over the years — and wiped some of the blood into the screw holes for plenty of identifying artist DNA!

Sharpening his tools was easy, being introduced to sharp knives by his butcher father and later having to hand sharpen drills, lathe tools and milling cutters as a fitter and turner. (Another hobby had been carving and sharpening throwing

knives made from Landrover and Holden springs.)

The strength of the body was a major consideration — making sure the lace-work of carving did not weaken the overall structural integrity with the horrible possibility of the 'weight' of the strings causing a catastrophic collapse.

One hole actually pierces the complete body and he says that he lived in 'terror and with blind faith' that all the different overlapping elements of the developing design would come together and make overall sense at some point in the future.

The first deeper incisions were done with a knife but later he used an engine shop porting tool to rough out deep holes.

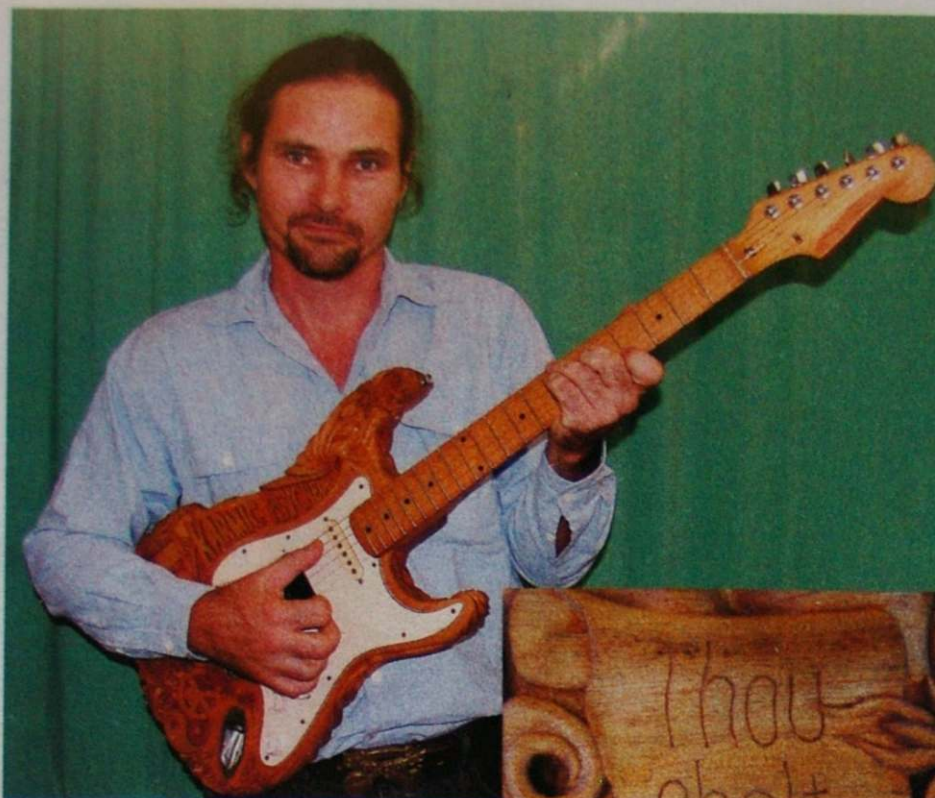
Most of the metal parts on the outside and inside were remade — as was the timber which originally held the electrics,

hardware and pick-ups. New brackets had to be made so they could be shifted and mounted somewhere else.

The body of the guitar has been made from three separate pieces of a light coloured close grained timber which appears (by the grain) to be cut from a large tree. It was probably laminated like this to reduce warping. One theory as to the species of timber is Japanese Spruce for the body and Strawberry Blondewood for the neck.

Brett says that since no one had ever been able to positively identify the timber that the body is made from, he looked into it a bit and found out that most Japanese guitars dating from the same period were constructed from Spruce sourced from that part of the world. Having carved it for so many years he says it is nothing like any Australian wood with which he has worked.

Some research on the Internet revealed a few general facts about Spruce. It has long been used for a variety of purposes,



including boxes and crates, musical instruments (including the violins made by Stradivarius) and ship's masts. Norwegian Spruce has been used for making burgundy pitch and tannin has been extracted from Spruce bark.

Young growth is still used to make spruce beer. The resin is an ingredient in many ointments and oils to relieve muscle tension, rheumatism, and to increase circulation.

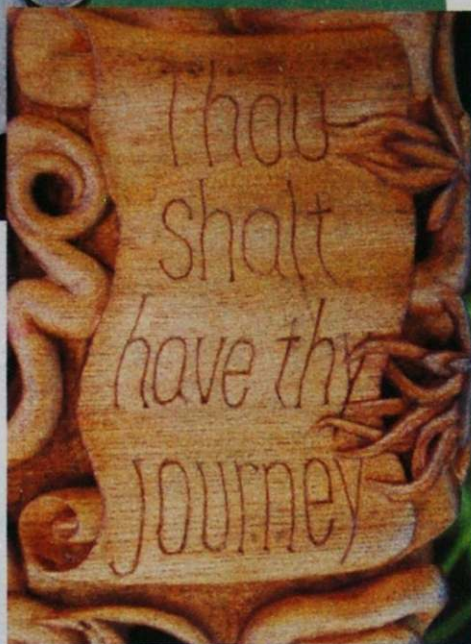
Brett found an article about the materials used in Japanese guitars that says: 'The timbers used to make these guitars were sourced from every corner of South East Asia. They were *old growth* ie. taken from well established forests. The advantages of this type of wood are long term stability and strength. Many of these timbers were species that are now on the endangered list and are therefore illegal to log and/or export.'

Nowadays most of the timber used for similar instruments is derived from plantations, which, although they may be better for the environment, produce wood that tends to be brittle and may even be unstable. This means that many repairs, such as restoring a broken headstock, is not practicable.

Of course, none of this actually helps identify the timber, but hopefully after this article appears, someone may be able to shed more light on the varieties of timber that were used in the Cosmic Guitar.

Finish

The finish? What else would a guitarist finish his carving with but Lemon Oil — a lubricant used for oiling and cleaning fingerboards and sound-



wood to a mellow gold.

The guitar was always good but is now 'absolutely harmonically and tonally perfect', says Brett, which was always his major aim — to create a beautiful looking instrument that sounded as good as it looked.

And Brett's one big regret? Carving the front first, as his carving technique improved markedly over the years.

After interviewing Brett, I've come to realise that if you have exceptional artistic ability, great hand skills, determination, tenacity, 'some kind of strange artistic mental disorder' (and, I think, above average intelligence), then start carving a major project with no plans and cheap tools.

If however, you are a mere mortal like myself, then some lessons and a few good tools would be the way to go!

NOTE: Brett has just finished spending 5000 hours creating a set of playing cards, believed to be the only completely new standard deck design ever completed in Australia. They are already selling all over the world, with every card in the deck being a work of art in its own right. Check out all of Brett's artwork including the card designs on his Sea of Pain Fine Art Productions website: www.seaofpain.com.

The scroll was carved a decade before Brett decided on the words to fill it

Cosmic guitar in original state



boards of acoustic guitars.

Lemon Oil was used for years to keep the wood from drying out and it stopped any cracking or splitting over the long carving process.

Along with the oil, age and handling has deepened the once much lighter

One of the brackets that Brett re-made



The devil's face

