

ZEN AND THE ART OF GUITAR REPAIR

By Roger Sadowsky

Many of you who are reading this no doubt aspire to repair fretted instruments on a professional level. I would like to share with you some of the attitudes that have made a huge contribution to my own level of professionalism. Many of these attitudes come from oriental philosophy — but you needn't spend years in a Zen monastery to incorporate them into your life and work. It has been my experience that these attitudes can transform a good repairperson into an exceptional one.

When I first began working on guitars, I promised myself that the day I stopped learning would be the day I hung up my shop apron and retired. This kept me going for about seven years, when my rate of learning reached a plateau. I no longer had any mentors to study with, and my own pace of self-learning slowed to a crawl. I felt I had reached the end of the road in my profession and was seriously thinking of quitting. What I realized at this point was that I needed a goal that was self-perpetuating and unattainable. I chose to master my craft. By committing myself to the *mastery* of guitar repair, every repair I performed became a learning experience.

All of a sudden, repairs ceased to be an end in themselves — they became opportunities to improve my skill and technique. Though I had done hundreds of fret jobs, now each one became a challenge to rise one level above the previous one.

A commitment to mastery sets two systems into motion. First, it provides a system of perpetual motivation. Second, it constantly refines and perfects your skills. One word of caution — you can never experience yourself as being a master. To label yourself as "master luthier" is an act of supreme arrogance.

What I call the "Samurai Attitude" is a fairly straightforward concept. Imagine you are the guitar repairperson to the Shogun of Japan in 1600. He brings you one of his guitars for a fret job. You do what you consider an excellent job. He picks up his guitar, examines your work, and detects a small file scratch in the fretboard. Before you can utter a sound, your head is rolling on the floor amongst the ebony dust.

Moral: do your work as if your life depended on it!

At the same time I committed myself to the mastery of guitar repair, I had another enlightening experience. I used to think that the reason I loved guitar work was that I loved guitars. While this is a true statement, I discovered that guitars alone are not capable of producing an experience of satisfaction in one's life. *The primary source of satisfaction in doing guitar work is serving the person who owns and plays the instrument.* Which is more satisfying—finishing a repair, or seeing the delight on the owner's face when he plays his instrument after you've worked on it?

Let me share with you some of the processes I go through in serving my clients. Most of my work consists of customizing a player's instruments to achieve improvements in playability and tonal performance. My clientele consists mostly of New York studio musicians, and they demand both the highest level of workmanship and prompt service.

The first step required is to create for yourself the player's experience of the instrument. How can you make subtle changes in string tension or tone unless you experience that particular instrument as the owner does? To accomplish this you must achieve good communication with your client and continue to question him until you have no doubts as to what is wanted. Without having to place your fingertips on the client's face, it is something like Mr. Spock performing a mindmeld on *Star Trek*.

Once you have discovered what your client wants, then you have to decide if the end result can be achieved. Even if it can be accomplished, are *you* the best qualified to do the job? If I know that one of my colleagues in town is better qualified than myself in certain areas (such as rebridging archtops), I will refer my customer to him. My goal is to serve my client, not to make a fast buck for myself.

If you are going to do the work, there are several factors to be considered. First, is the work required to achieve the desired result going to be cost-effective with respect to the instrument? It took me many years to learn that I can make a good guitar a superior one, but I can't make a poor guitar a good one. You have to learn to recognize the inherent potential of the instrument to be improved. You will serve your clients well if you don't waste their money.

You also should strive to keep your personal biases out of your work. I know of a repairman who is a very fine jazz guitarist. If you go to him with a guitar set up for .009" strings and want a buzzing problem corrected, he probably will tell you to use medium gauge jazz strings. This is not the way to serve your clients. In summary:

1. Be crystal-clear about what your client wants and expects.
2. Decide if it can be accomplished, and who is best qualified to perform the work.
3. Don't waste your client's money.
4. Give your client what he wants—not what you think he should have.
5. Don't con anybody. If you can't give your client what he wants, be honest about it.

The result of these attitudes is that you build long-term client relationships rather than make a fast buck. The client you refer to a colleague for an arch-top bridge will come back to you in the future for other work. The musician you talk out of wasting his money on useless customizing will be a customer for life. The client who isn't quite sure what he wants yet, will always respect you if you tell him to think it over for a while before he has any work done.

No matter how good your work is, the most important thing you have is your word. I know of many repairpersons who sabotage whatever skill they have by not keeping their word. If halfway through a repair you discover you underestimated the time and cost of a job, please don't call your customer and tell him it's now going to cost more. Chalk it up to mastering the art of estimating. And if you promise that a repair will be done on Friday at 3:00, you better be sure it's done on time. Remember — at 3:01, the samurai will be there to have your head!

It always has amazed me how many repairpersons consider their customers to be neurotic nuisances. In 95% of all cases, a customer is difficult for the following reasons:

1. you have not communicated with him effectively;
2. you have given him false expectations; and
3. you did not achieve the desired result, and rather than accepting responsibility for it, you blame your customer.

The relationship I have with my clientele is almost always totally satisfying. It has been my experience that if you conduct your business on a professional level, professional musicians will beat a path to your door.

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