

The Bass Men

In the classical sense, it can be argued that when expert musicians think of the finest musical instruments they look to Europe and the Continent's many generations of meticulous instrument building.

America takes a back seat to no one in the crafting of high-end basses.

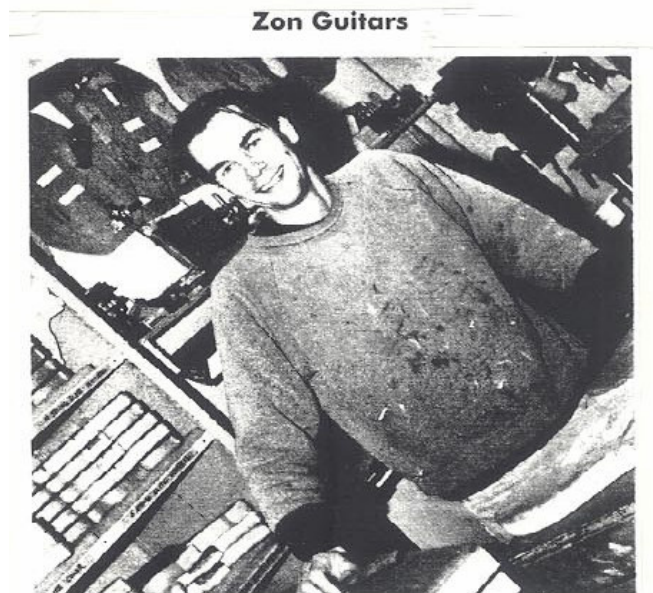
However, in today's modern world of instrument crafting at the upper echelons of quality, American makers have reaped increasing recognition for premium quality and innovation. The many top-grade acoustic guitar luthiers plying their trade in the United States are an obvious example.

Perhaps less conspicuous is the coterie of American electric bass makers, who are widely imitated worldwide (and particularly by European craftsman), but who continue to set the standard in creating instruments that combine functionality, beauty and unparalleled playability.

MMR recently spoke with five of this country's top bass makers to gauge current market conditions and trends and to find out what keeps the U.S. on top in top-end basses.

Joseph Zon got his start in high-end instruments in 1981, crafting custom guitars and basses with carbon fiber necks out of a small shop in Buffalo, NY. Six years later, Zon and his colleagues relocated to Redwood City, CA. During the California years, the company has flourished, according to its owner.

"I think our business can best be compared to car makers like Mercedes, BMW or any other luxury maker," he comments. "You always are going to have a market for high-end product. But what's really interesting about the top of the bass market is that bass players, in general, tend to be more open-minded in terms of expanding the sound of their instrument--musically 'stretching out' into different areas, Since this is the case, it's always shocked me to go to music shows like NAMM and be surrounded by all these creative, artistic minds who turn out nothing but Strat and P-Bass copies."



One trend Zon notices these days is the increase in sales of fretless modes, which he feels are on the comeback trail. “There are definitely more fretless basses being played“, he continues. “We’ve had an increase in sales of fretless instruments and I think a lot of it has to do with the fact that many pros are embracing the instrument and finding out it’s not as tough as they thought. In turn, amateur players are seeing their heroes up there with fretless basses and they become less intimidated themselves.”