

# Pacific Rim Tonewoods:

Skagit company turns trees into music

By John D'Onofrio



**STEVE MCMINN IS** living his dream.

His company, Pacific Rim Tonewoods, located in Concrete, has quietly become a key player in the specialized world of high-end musical instrument manufacturing, supplying some of the world's best tonewoods to major guitar makers like Martin and Taylor.

It all began back in 1981 when McMinn decided to build a guitar. He purchased a kit

**(L-to-R) Eric Warner, general manager and Steve McMinn, owner and founder of Pacific Rim Tonewoods**

and was dismayed at the quality of the wood supplied. When it came to trees, McMinn was no babe in the woods. The son of a forester, McMinn had been brought up with a distinct appreciation for wood. He had put himself through college by logging and had worked for the Park Service, spending summers on a trail crew. He'd been a boat builder and had taught woodshop at Western Washington University. McMinn knew – and loved wood.

He began salvaging blown-down spruce from Forest Service lands in Washington and Alaska, splitting up promising logs and backpacking them out of the forest. He turned his garage into a wood-working shop and created a business that focused on innovative techniques of milling “the right wood in the right way.” Pacific Rim Tonewoods was born, combining his love for wood, beauty, music and craft. As the business grew, he needed more space. With the help of Don Wick of the Economic Development Association of Skagit County he moved his milling operation to the old Van De Grift Mill, a collection of run-down buildings on Highway 20, outside of Concrete.

His business plan consisted of four objectives:

- Make a profit
- Make the best soundboards in the world
- Create interesting, engaging jobs that pay well
- Have fun

Now, more than 20 years later, Pacific Rim Tonewoods has accomplished these goals, and in the process has become one of the preeminent suppliers of wood to instrument makers in the world, supplying expertly crafted soundboards to C.F. Martin and Company, Taylor, Gibson and Fender as well as a who's who of custom builders. In addition to guitars, Pacific Rim Tonewoods products can be found on world-class violins, basses and mandolins – and recently ukuleles (see sidebar).

With annual revenues in the \$2-\$5 million range and 17 employees, McMinn's vision has grown into one

of rural Skagit County's biggest businesses.

“Eighty percent of our business comes from Martin and Taylor,” McMinn explains, “but we also supply Gibson and a hundred others. Largely our market focus is on factories and larger builders.”

And as the business has grown, McMinn has never wavered from his commitment to his employees, many of whom have been with him for more than 20 years. He's proud to be able to offer family wages, good benefit packages and a 401K to his staff. By virtue of the extremely high-end nature of the products that Pacific Rim Tonewoods produces, he can afford it. Margins are good, he says – “better than



Steve McMinn: “Waste is stupid and it makes you stupid as a business.”

 A collage of four images: top-left shows an outdoor seating area with wooden picnic tables and benches; top-right shows a chalkboard menu with various beer options; bottom-left shows an indoor dining area with tables and chairs; bottom-right shows the Skagit River Brewery logo.
 

## Outdoor Seating

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The cutting edge: New sharpening technologies play a key role at Pacific Rim Tonewoods

selling two-by-fours”.

Although the company deals in cedar, figured maple and the occasional exotic (imported rosewood and ebony), ‘it’s bread and butter is Sitka spruce,” a resource that is plentiful in the Pacific Northwest, according to McMinn.

“We individually select logs ranging from Oregon to Alaska,” McMinn says. “We buy from timber companies, sawmills and individuals,” building on long-established relationships.

“I’ve been to Alaska five times this year,” he explains, “and selected some 200 logs that are barged to Everett and trucked to Concrete.” Maple is procured locally and hauled on the company’s truck. McMinn

emphasizes the value of these long-term relationships. “We’re always looking for win-win situations. We pay a premium, think long-term and always do what we say we will.”

He has recently begun talks with members of British Columbia’s Haida tribe to procure FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) certified wood, so designated because of the sustainable forestry practices employed in harvesting. A Haida enterprise, Taan Forest entered into an agreement with BC Timber Sales to manage forestry lands on Haida Gwaii (the Queen Charlotte Islands) last year.

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Steve McMinn,  
Owner, Pacific Rim Tonewoods

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“For the Haida to have control over their forests is big,” McMinn notes.

The access to FSC wood fits the company’s strategic objectives perfectly. “Our customers are very keen to have wood from sustainable sources,” McMinn explains.

His lifetime in the woods has instilled a deep sense of stewardship in McMinn. “The natural world has been much diminished,” he believes. “We’re using wood from 400-year old trees. It’s irreplaceable. We want to have as light a footprint as possible and get as much as we can out of the wood.”

In addition to sourcing sustainable raw materials and creating efficient and resource-respectful practices, McMinn has spent a lot of time thinking about waste. “Waste is stupid,” he says, “and it makes you stupid as a business.”

To reduce waste, Pacific Rim Tonewoods has an arrangement with Northwest Chip and Grind in Bellingham to collect wood waste.

“They haul it and grind it and it goes to a co-generation facility in Everett,” McMinn explains.

“We also purchased a German machine that makes bricks out of compressed sawdust,” he says. “They burn very clean and very well. We used to have to pay to get rid of it and now it’s a slight revenue stream. Fuel pellets are taking off in Europe because you’re using carbon that has already been sequestered.”

Pacific Rim Tonewoods has managed the economic downturn comparably well. “We were not immune,” McMinn says. “We didn’t have to lay anybody off” although employees saw their hours slightly reduced.

“Because guitars are consumer items, the business fluctuates,” McMinn explains. “Musical instruments don’t always track the general economy.”

“Guitar makers cut their inventory levels when the downturn hit,” he says. Sales were down 65 percent the first year but the following year saw record numbers as instrument makers replenished dwindling inventories.

“Martin has been in business for 170 years,” he notes. “They understand the importance of building and maintaining a strategic spruce inventory.”

Recently the company has invested in new sharpening technologies, as part of a never-ending quest for improvement and according to McMinn, the future of the company is bright indeed.

It’s been a long journey since that first guitar back in ’81. The body of that guitar was eventually burned in a bonfire, but the soundboard was saved and now hangs on a wall at Pacific Rim Tonewoods, a reminder of how it all began.

Praise for the exquisite products that Pacific Rim Tonewoods produce continues to grow. And – one suspects – sounds like music to Steve McMinn’s ears. ■

## UKULELE PASSION SPURS NEW VENTURE

**B**ellingham’s Brian Griffin is having a hard time staying retired. After 35 years in the insurance business (he was a founder of the Unity Group), the toy business (founder of The Children’s Company) and the Bee business (founder of Knox Cellars Native Bee Pollinators), he has teamed up with his grandson, Evan Christie, to launch

House & Mill Tonewoods, offering state-of-the-art tonewoods for the construction of ukuleles.

“I began building ukuleles 2 1/2 years ago,” Griffin says. “I am now working on five at once, which, when finished, will bring the total made to 21. I am trying five at a time to establish efficiencies and figure out labor saving jigs, etc.”

Griffin recently travelled to San Diego to meet with Jesus Jurado, an employee of Taylor Guitars in Mexico who has his own five-man shop at his home in Tijuana. Plans are underway to contract with Jurado to build ukuleles to Griffins’ exacting specifications using soundboards from Pacific Rim Tonewoods. The finished instruments will be sold to music stores up and down the west coast.

The idea was born when Griffin, a long-time customer of the Skagit Valley based company discovered that some guitar soundboards manufactured by the firm were being discarded because of minor flaws. Griffin figured that by using the soundboards for the much smaller ukuleles, the wood could be trimmed to eliminate the flaws. Presto: a business was born.

“Pacific Rim has been remarkably helpful to me with knowledge, advice, and introductions to people in the music business,” Griffin says. “They encouraged us to attend the NAMM (National Association of Music Merchants) convention in

Anaheim and there introduced us to a number of people. They are just really generous pleasant folks.”

Pacific Rim owner Steve McMinn was happy to help. “Brian said that these scraps would be perfect” for his project, he says. The arrangement fit perfectly with McMinn’s ethos. “The minimization of waste,” he explains, “has always been one of our core principles.”

And guess what: ukuleles are hot.

According to Griffin, ukuleles “are riding a big wave of popularity worldwide. Ukulele groups are popping up everywhere. Ukes sell from \$45 to \$5,000 in four sizes. Some great young musicians are traveling the world playing with amazing skill (rock star Eddie Vedder recently released *Ukulele Songs* to widespread acclaim).”

“All this feeds the fire and builds the market,” Griffin says. “There are a hundred members of The Bellingham Ukulele Group (BUG) who meet to play twice a month.” According to Griffin, ukuleles are – in terms of numbers – the biggest selling instruments at Bellingham’s Mojo Music these days.

“Retirement means you have the time to do what interests you,” he explains. “I am making this little run at a new business because I am fascinated with the ukulele and I am having fun working with a grandson who shares that interest. We have designed and built a really exceptional instrument and it will be fun to see if we can make this project work.”

