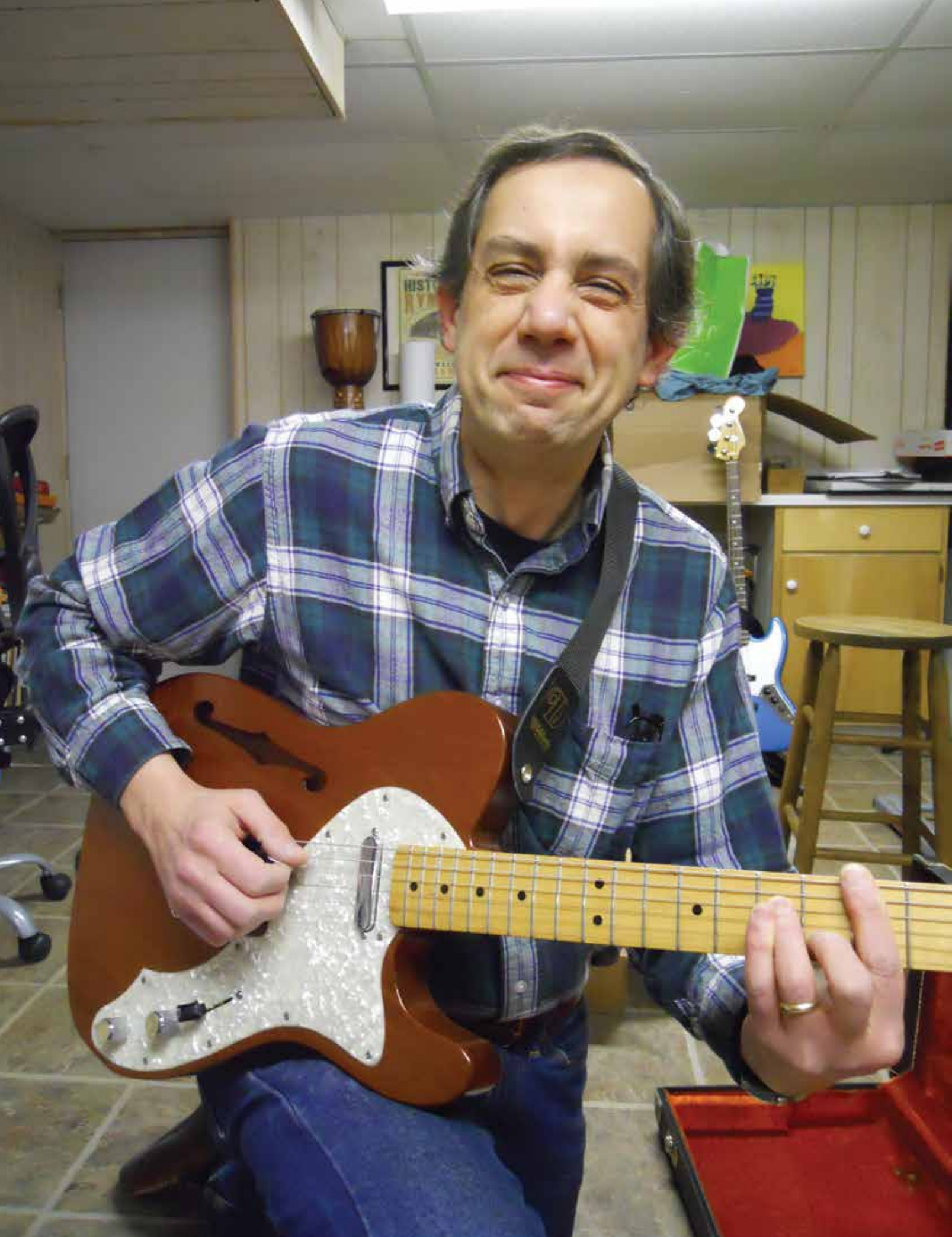


Beyond The Law: Jim Katsiaficas

Interview and Photos by Daniel J. Murphy

Many take pleasure in playing guitar, but few take on the challenge of building their own instruments. Jim Katsiaficas has a foot planted in each camp. When he is not playing with his roots-rock garage band, The Fullertons, he often can be found in his basement working on his next axe. At present, a surf-green electric guitar body hangs on a basement wall, part of an instrument that eventually will be played by one of his sons. While nothing provides an immediate rush quite like an electric guitar, the truth is that each instrument is the product of long hours of carving, milling, painting, sanding, and buffing. After a guitar looks presentable, the job is only half done; it still needs to fitted with pickups, volume and tone controls, and other parts. The instrument also needs to be carefully adjusted to ensure proper action and intonation, an undertaking that is not for those short of patience. For Katsiaficas, who practices law at Perkins Thompson in Portland, the satisfaction of playing one of his own guitars is worth the all of the effort and challenges along the way. He recently sat down with the *Maine Bar Journal* to discuss his interest.

MBJ: Please tell our readers about your interest in guitar restoration. What does a luthier do?

JK: A luthier does everything from building stringed instruments, including guitars, to repairing and setting them up. Most of the work that I do is in repair and set-up. For example, I make the guitars play more easily or make them sound better. For electric guitars, it can be changing the electric pick-ups for more vintage sounding ones, or it could be adjusting the saddles and nuts in order for them to play more easily.

MBJ: Do you also do work on acoustic guitars?

JK: I do. I haven't built an acoustic yet, though. That's quite a challenge—and beyond my skill set right now—but maybe someday.

MBJ: It seems like such delicate work.

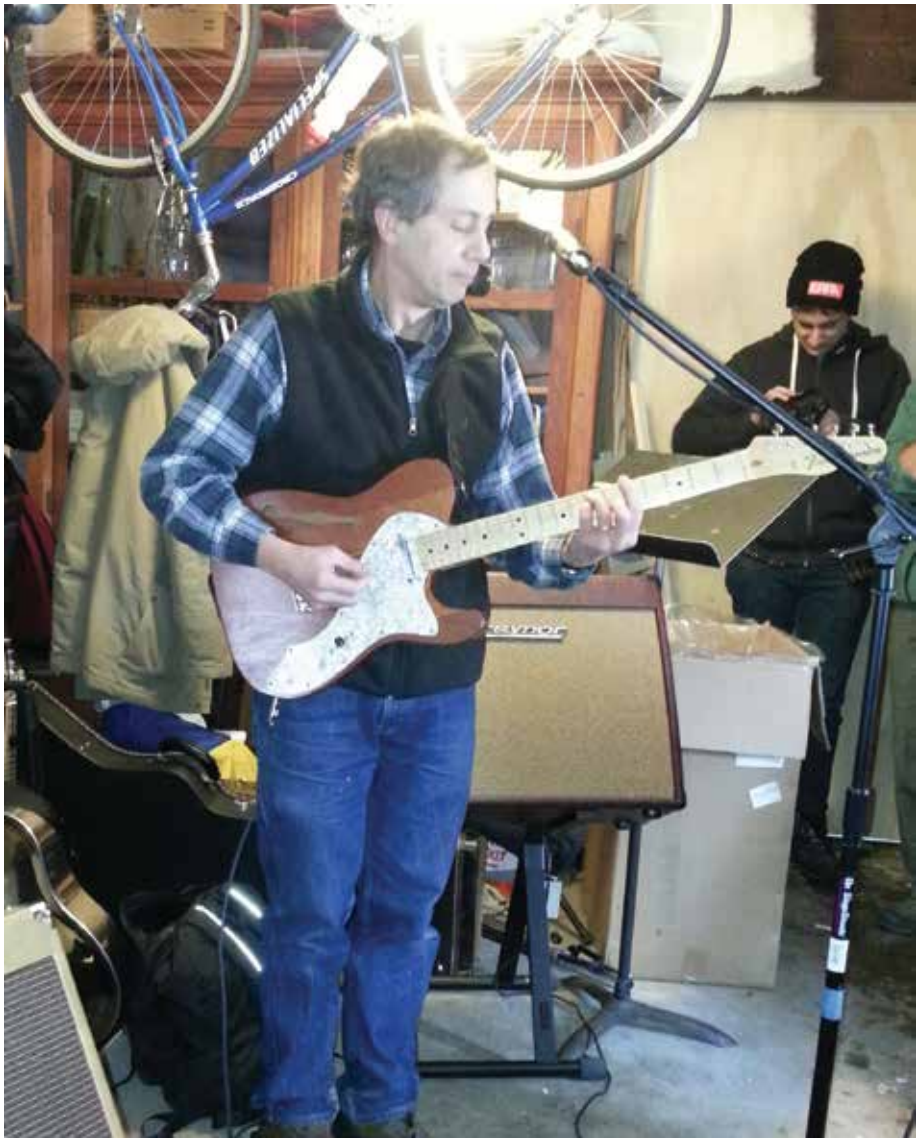
JK: It is. Luthiery encompasses more than just guitars; it includes the other stringed instruments such as violins, mandolins, and banjos. More recently, as my wife has started playing fiddle, I've been learning how to fix violins as well. That, of course, could be a lifelong adventure. Violins require an even more delicate touch than guitars.

MBJ: How did you become interested in guitar restoration?

JK: By hot-rodding my own guitars. I was probably 15 and wanted to hot-rod my Gibson Les Paul so that it looked like Eric Clapton's guitar. I pulled the metal covers off of the pickups and adjusted it, and was on my way. From then on, I was fiddling with and fixing guitars for friends. I then went on doing that while I was in college and while working in a retail store for a while after college.

MBJ: Do you recall the results from that first adjustment on your Gibson?

JK: Luckily, I didn't break anything, and I was pleased that I was able to accomplish the work.



MBJ: Did you get that Eric Clapton sound that you were looking for?

JK: Well, that's in the fingers, but at least the guitar wasn't holding me back.

MBJ: What is it about guitar restoration that gives you satisfaction?

JK: It's the repair and building aspects. It's meeting with musicians and trying to understand what their needs are with the instrument. It's in trying to make the instrument deliver the sound and playability the user seeks. So it isn't just repair; it's also customizing or adjusting to add what's needed. That's an interesting thing that is different from the law, where you can be working on a project for a long period of time without seeing an end result. For example, it took me about 10 years to complete work on closing a landfill, while in one weekend I can assemble a complete electric guitar or I could repair several. You have something that's tangible and it's a good balance to the legal practice where things are reduced to paper and can take years to complete.

Part of it, too, is that when people come in with busted-up instruments that you're recycling, you're getting more use out of something old. You're also helping people with their craft when they bring in instruments that are out of adjustment, need to be fixed, or need to be made more suitable to the desired use. So it's gratifying in the same way that playing some of the old music and keeping it alive is gratifying too.

MBJ: Have you had any emergency-room type repairs on instruments?

JK: Yes. I remember when I was working at a store in New Hampshire, a musician who had a New Year's Eve gig prevailed upon me to fix his electric guitar. The circuitry was gone, but I got him to the point where he could play his gig that evening. So yes, on New Year's Eve at 6 p.m., I was fixing a guitar that had to go on stage in about three hours.

MBJ: Have there been any guitars that you've built for others?

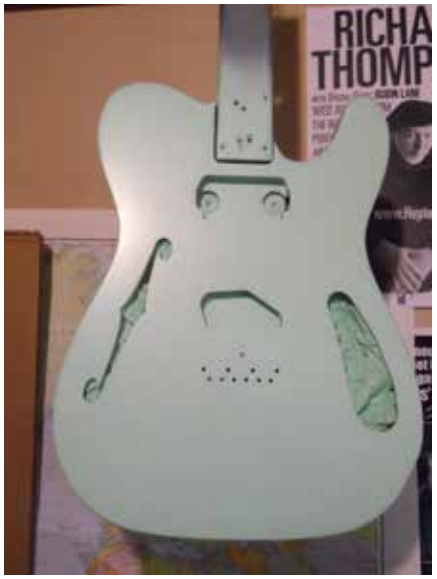
JK: Yes.

MBJ: What types of guitars are those?

JK: They are basically modeled on the Fender Telecaster. I've built one for a good friend of mine who's a minister in Virginia. We call that one the "Pastorcaster"—it says that on the headstock. I've also built several guitars that are played in this area.

MBJ: What is the process for shaping an electric guitar body?

JK: The process involves gluing up a blank of hardwood and then cutting the rough outline with the band saw. I trim it with a router and template to its final shape and then use a router to cut out the cavities for all of the electronics and the neck. The necks are premade, but unfinished. I'm not quite able to make a neck on my own. Perhaps when this becomes my retirement job, I could try that. I finish the necks and then assemble them with the bodies that I build. I have built probably about a half dozen this way and there are many more that I've finished and assembled from premade parts. I have several guitar bodies underway, including one I'm building with my younger son right now.



MBJ: Do you find that different wood blanks provide different tones for an electric guitar?

JK: Yes, very much so. The classic wood for a Telecaster is ash and for a Stratocaster is alder. For a Les Paul it's mahogany with a maple cap. They all have their distinct tones. It isn't just the guitar shape, string length, or scale, although these are factors. The type of wood does make quite a difference.

MBJ: Do you have a preferred type of wood that you use for electric guitar bodies?

JK: Well, for my own, I prefer alder.

MBJ: What's alder like?

JK: Alder is a hardwood wood that grows primarily out in the American Northwest, although there is some in Maine too. This was the primary wood for Fenders built from about 1956 onward, for Stratocasters and some Telecasters. It just has the right tone for my ear.

MBJ: And where do you source materials?

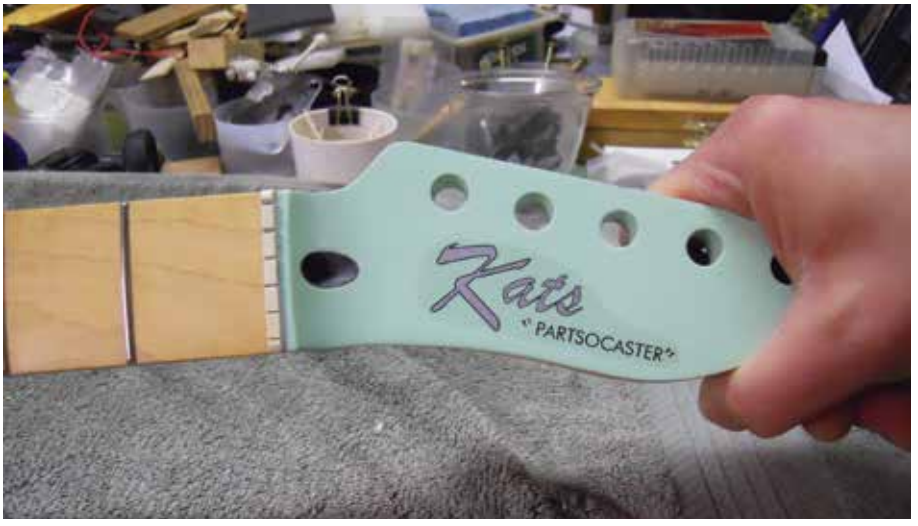
JK: For wood blanks, I tend to order from some companies out in the Pacific Northwest. And then for some things like southern yellow pine and white pine when I want to build one of those really light guitars, I buy that locally from the wood shops right in town.

MBJ: Do you have a favorite guitar that you've made or restored?

JK: Probably the first body that I built. It's a thin-line Telecaster style—the guitar is hollow on the inside with just a center block and it's made of Honduras mahogany. It's light and loud.

MBJ: Do you get to use these guitars out in town on gigs?

JK: I do. I have a very part-time band with several good friends, and we're known as The Fullertons. We rehearse about once a month and play a few gigs a year, usually benefits for various causes in the area. We call our music "Garage Americana" because it's blues, folk, country, and rock, but also the garage-rock hits from the 60s.



MBJ: Do other members of the band have custom guitars?

JK: Actually, one of the guitar players does—he uses one that I helped him build.

MBJ: Have you played any particularly gratifying gigs that featured your guitars?

JK: I think one of the more fun gigs that I've played was the Maine Walks With Haiti fundraiser for Konbit Sante that we did last year. I used my homemade Telecaster.

MBJ: What's the best advice you've ever received?

JK: That's obviously a tough one. Over the years, you get a lot of advice from a lot of people, and much of it is helpful in both work and life. Probably the thing that sticks with me most was from Merton Henry, who told me, long before it became a cliché, that we earn a good living from our community as attorneys and we also owe the community to give back. That's what he expected from others and he certainly has given back to his community. I hope I can live up to his example and that advice.

Daniel J. Murphy is a shareholder in Bernstein Shur's Business Law and Litigation Practice Groups, where his practice concentrates on business and commercial litigation matters.

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