

This City



PROFILE

Guitar Hero

Sergei de Jonge crafts instruments that end up in the hands of Don Henley and The Gypsy Kings **BY PHIL CARON**

SERGEI DE JONGE lives in the rolling hills of southwestern Quebec. The land here is dominated by trees, the lifeblood of his work. Deer and the occasional bear traipse through the stunningly beautiful woods between the farms and cottages. Pastoral splendour aside, de Jonge says this forest is not what it once was.

The old growth is long gone. The entire area was logged heavily for over a century, and the towering 12-storey trees were made into floorboards, roof

beams, and masts for sailing ships.

You get a reminder of the past behind de Jonge's shop. There, a startlingly large white pine stump stands, eight feet tall and 12 feet around. It looks like the remnant of a dinosaur. De Jonge's eyes light up when he shows it to me; he's thinking of extending the deck and incorporating the massive stump into the design. Quirky? Perhaps. But it's more practical than that—it's simply a case of respect for the land.

Necessity brought de Jonge, 57, to the luthier's trade in the late 1960s when he started guitar-playing lessons: he simply couldn't afford to buy the instruments he wanted. "My teacher had a custom guitar that I lusted for, but when I found out how much it cost...well, you can imagine, my hair completely stood on end."

De Jonge had just started teachers' college when he had a chance meeting with Jean Claude Larrivée, the soon-to-be godfather of Canadian guitar builders. "I asked him if I could work with him, and he said, 'Come around to my shop on Tuesday and we'll talk.' So on Monday, I went to teachers' college and dropped out. Then on Tuesday, I went to Larrivée's shop and—luckily—became his very first apprentice."

De Jonge's intention was to build a single guitar for personal use. But Larrivée made him work in the shop

for six months before he was allowed to build anything. By the time his guitar was finished, de Jonge was broke, so he sold the guitar and had to make another one. He sold that one, too, and a third, and then he was hooked. "That's how I started," he says. "I just kept on going." He now ships his guitars to the United States, Europe, and Japan.

De Jonge has a small bony frame, a trim beard over sunken cheeks, and a mischievous grin. After more than 30 years at the bench, his fingers have become thick and coarse. The fingernails are buried in calloused flesh, and his right hand is lightly stained from tobacco smoke.

One can guess that his hands are like a second pair of eyes, judging and understanding nuances that aren't

visible. What can be seen is beautiful: African blackwood, Brazilian rosewood, tiger-striped maple, brick red mahogany, and deeply figured ziricote. One of his favourites is eastern red spruce, a wood of choice for the guitar top—the soundboard. A lot of spruce comes from Quebec and Nova Scotia, where trees still grow high and wide enough for a luthier's needs. Also known as Adirondack spruce or Appalachian spruce, the clear, mostly knot-free wood has a stiff grain that produces complex tones and robust volumes. But it is not the only wood used for soundboards. "Sitka spruce is wonderful too," he says (it is used in Steinway grand pianos), "but the old C.F. Martin guitars used red spruce, and many steel-string players feel close to that history."

In the workshop that day is Satoshi Wakisaka. He came from Japan for one of de Jonge's guitar-building courses and has decided to double up his workload: he's building two guitars—a classical and a steel string—in the five weeks usually allotted for building one. Wakisaka doesn't speak English, so he videotapes each day's instructions and studies them at night. A mechanical engineer by trade, he's accustomed to being meticulous. Still, it's an awkward learning process. Right now there are only two students, so de Jonge is happy to repeat his demonstrations. Sharing knowledge is an important part of luthier culture. "I have no secrets," de Jonge says, "It's not how the trade developed in North America."

Secrets are no concern, really, because only de Jonge can make a Sergei de Jonge guitar. Both consciously and unconsciously, each person injects part of himself into his creation (and that's why each of de Jonge's guitars sounds so damn good).

Five of his six children don't do a bad job either. The youngest child, Korin, 14, has already built three guitars, while the eldest, who is 28 years old, has built around 50. Her name is Joshia, and her guitars are beginning to rival her father's. Joshia built her first guitar when she was 13. At 16, she graduated from her father's inaugural guitar-making course, and when she was 19, one of her guitars was celebrated at a Guild of American Luthiers convention.

Guitar building has been good to this family. Summer jobs for the kids are always available, and the family always has something to do together. Joshia juts her chin in the direction of the workshop and says, "I love it when we're all in there."

If you read about them, you'll find that many of the great guitar builders are obsessed with minor details. A little extra glue here, a little less sanding there—it all has an effect. But de Jonge is an exception to the rule. When I begin to ask all the technical questions—like what kind of bracing he uses on the soundboards—he seems indifferent, maybe even a little bored.

For him, the making of a guitar is a totality.