



TIM GRIFFIN

Griffin Instrument Technologies

BY DAVID MORRISON

I've spoken before in these pages about the power of coincidence, and how wonderfully random events of this nature have a habit of occurring in my life. To an extent it has happened again, surrounding the article you are now reading.

A short while ago I was on Texada Island for a working weekend. On the Saturday night I watched Elvis Costello's *Spectacle* show on TV. One of the guests, singer-songwriter Jesse Winchester, performed a solo acoustic version of *Sham-A-Ling-Dong-Ding* (from his current release, *Love Filling Station*) so spellbinding and beautiful that it reduced fellow guest Neko Case to tears. Me too.

Three days later, I spent an entertaining half-hour in the telephonic company of luthier/musician Tim Griffin, of Griffin Instrument Technologies in Qualicum Beach. As he regaled me with tales of his life in music and otherwise, Griffin happened to mention he once did some recording with Ron Dann, one of Canada's finest ever exponents of the pedal steel guitar. In researching Dann's full credentials after our conversation, I noted that he worked with such iconic artists as Murray McLachlan and Ian Tyson and, wouldn't you know it, Jesse Winchester.

So there I was, chatting breezily away with a guy who, unbeknownst to me at the time, was one of two degrees of separation from the legend whose performance

had moved Case and I three days prior. It seems as if all related, my friends...

Anyway, I also learned plenty more about Griffin during those 30 minutes, including that one life path was clearly signposted for him as a child. "I got my first guitar when I was 10 years-old and have been around guitars and guitar players since that time," he begins. "And high school is when you first think 'I've got to start a band', just like Bryan Adams sings about in that song. (He means *Summer of '69*, of course). When I first heard that song I thought, 'How did he hear about me? He's singing about me here!'"

So, after getting his first real six-string (not at the five-and-dime, but under the Christmas tree), and having a band that tried real hard (The Invaders), the young Griffin really began to learn his chops post-high school after joining a serious English outfit called Piccadilly Circus. "I went on the road in 1969," he continues. (I so hope it was in the summer!). "They were already an established professional touring band that had played all over England and in Italy, France, Germany and Spain, and they were touring Mexico, the US and Canada. It was an excellent band playing whatever was popular at the time. I remember we drove past this big outdoor festival we heard about in upstate New York, and it turned out to be Woodstock!"

Griffin's love of guitars and similarly stringed things led him to his profession for the last 26 years: the art of luthiery or, to the layman, constructing and repairing them. He loves nothing more than to play his handcrafted dobro, the reward of many weekends of patience and skilled application. Luthiery takes plenty of both, but would naturally suit an individual with an aptitude for technicality. Having spent many years working in highly technical arenas, this is where Griffin excels. For example, he used to be a weapons technician in the (Royal) Canadian Navy, proudly serving on HMCS Bonaventure. (This vessel was the last aircraft carrier to serve the Canadian Navy. Decommissioned in 1970, her anchor now stands in Point Pleasant Park, Halifax, NS).

"I've always tried to challenge myself technically, and they needed people in that branch of the Navy," Griffin explains. "I also worked at Northern Telecom for four or five years on a robotics line – robots placing components on printed circuit boards – so I think all of the skills I have now in luthiery work, I probably owe to Northern Telecom and the Navy."

Griffin moved to Qualicum Beach three years ago from Calgary, where he had been working as a luthier at the Calgary branch of Long & McQuade. It was here where the opportunity to join another band arose. "The manager of our band department was also the leader of this 18-piece jazz band," he tells me, referring to Southern Stardust (www.southernstardust.ca). "When I'd work on people's guitars, I'd play them to test my work. I knew some jazz things and so the band manager said I should come try out with his big band. So I went and, sure enough, they liked me – and I absolutely loved them – so

the band for four years. After a year they asked me to sing. We did a live radio show on CKUA, which was the first time I sang with the band, but at the end of the four years I was singing 12-15 songs a night. Ha-ha, everybody thought I was Frank Sinatra! A friend of mine gave me a CD of Frank live with Count Basie at The Sands (*Sinatra at The Sands: Reprise, 1966*) and I listened to *I've Got You Under My Skin* about, ooh, a thousand times, and just stole all of his stuff!"

Griffin is quite the jazz fan, citing such as Hank Garland, Herb Ellis and Barney Kessel as favourites or influences. Country music, too, plays a big part in his life, with the legendary ilk of George Jones, Lefty Frizzell, Merle Haggard and Ernest Tubbs all receiving the Griffin seal of approval during our chat. Interestingly, when I pressed him on his favourite guitarist, after

much agonizing ("Ooh, oh...er, oh lord... oh lord...sigh...oh...gosh...sigh..."), it was a guitarist most associated with country styles that Griffin was keen to talk about, notably the lessons he learned from him at an impressionable age.

"I heard a radio interview with Chet Atkins when I was about 12 years-old," he recalls, "and he was asked: What sort of advice would you give to young players starting out, Chet? I remember him saying learn all the styles of music, not just one – learn rock, folk, country, jazz, Peruvian yak music if there is such a thing! – because the more styles you're able to play, the easier it will be to get work as a musician. I thought what a smart guy he is, so I'm going to do what he said!"

It is so obvious when talking with this charming man that he truly loves his work.

To illustrate this I feel the only way to wrap this up is with the words that concluded our conversation, as they speak volumes about Griffin and his motivation:

"A guy brought me his dad's 1937 K acoustic flat top guitar in three Safeway bags and said: 'I don't care how much this costs, but I want this guitar to play.' But I said to him: 'I think it's my ethical duty to tell you I'm going to charge you over \$1,000 to rebuild this guitar, but when I do, it's going to be playable.' So I rebuilt it, and he was in tears when he picked it up. I thought to myself, that's what keeps me doing this." ~

Griffin Instrument Technologies is located at 4148 W Island Hwy, Qualicum Beach. For more information visit www.gobc.ca/griffin or contact Tim Griffin at (250) 240-4520.

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