

Do you own a Fender or Gibson and just can't bring yourself to reroute it for those hotter pick-ups, or you just don't like the paint job? You're not alone. I own a 1976 Fender Stratocaster, not exactly "vintage," but a very nice Strat nonetheless. It has a "blond" neck, and I always wanted rosewood. It has the typical three single coils, and I always wanted at least one humbucker. It has the stock three position switch, but that never really seemed to get me all of the sounds I thought it should. Don't get me wrong, I love my Strat, but it was because I love my Strat that I just couldn't modify it, vintage or not.

It was because of all this that I decided to take the plunge. I had absolutely no idea what I was doing, nor am I some master carpenter with a shop full of tools. I don't even have a shop! But I did have the desire to build my own guitar.

My philosophy was: I want to have a guitar that I can do whatever I want to make it perfect, and if my definition of perfect changed, so should the guitar. Here's what I did.

Now, when I started this project I was a poor college student. Poor is the key word here. I looked at the whole thing objectively. I knew a few things about guitars, and I read a lot. I also asked a great deal of questions. I talked to friends, music store owners, and carpenters. I knew that Les Pauls were made from mahogany, so I asked around. Every major city in the U.S. has at least one exotic wood "store." These are places where woodworkers and cabinet makers can go and buy really cool wood. I measured my Strat, and I went in search.

I bought a 2'x2'x2" slab of Honduras mahogany for about \$40.00. I had to look around a bit, and I did manage to get a "cheap" section because most wood yards cut off the end sections due to "checking" or splitting of boards. Take your time shopping but, talk fast and pay fast--the deals are out there. There are also some very beautiful woods that would probably not work well as guitars too, so shop around. The rule I followed was the denser the wood the better the sustain.

Now, I knew that I couldn't afford a custom neck like I wanted, and I knew that I couldn't make one with the few tools that I do own. Logic took me to the pawn shop. Many guitar manufactures use inexpensive bodies and nasty paint-like substances to save money and still catch your eye. It was with this knowledge that I went looking. For \$100.00 (the price of a good replacement neck alone) I walked away with a chip-board case containing a butt-ugly ply-wood, red and white zebra striped, off-brand guitar with a nice rosewood finger board/maple neck and working electronics. The head even had Grover tuners on it!

I gave a guy five dollars and my traced piece of mahogany. Mahogany is very dense and two inches of it needs a very large band-saw. I then took a small amount of my hard-earned cash down and rented a router at the local hardware store. I measured the neck, measured the holes in the now striped zebra guitar and went to work. In about an hour I had what even looked like a guitar! Okay, so a friend helped me smooth out the edges, and I over routed the knob cavity a little too much, but other than that, it looked like I knew what I was doing.

My friend and I were down in the music store one afternoon and the owner, who we had befriended several purchases before, asked if we were interested in a job prospect. He needed some help in knocking out a concrete doorway so that he could expand his shop. Two nights later, with a few sore muscles, he said anything in his shop under \$100.00 was ours. I grabbed up a Floyd licensed tremolo with a locking nut and fine tuners. Payment enough.

At this point, I had a working guitar. I had taken the electronics, pickguard, neck and everything else from the "zebra" guitar and put it on the mahogany ax. It looked rough but it was a treasure.

Over the next couple of years I planed and sanded the body and treated it with this super stuff they use on gun stocks, very durable. I have also replaced the pickups with two Carvin single coils and a humbucker. The guy down the street made me a custom birds-eye maple pickguard that even covered my poor routing skills. As I have had the money I have replaced just about everything from the old pawnshop special.

While cruising through an old issue of *Guitar Player Magazine* (Aug. '87) I ran across a custom wiring schematic that would hot-wire your Strat. Dan Armstrong very simply explained the entire process. I, of course, work with electronics about as well as I do routers, so I had a computer-brain friend do the wiring/soldering for a pizza. The April 1996 edition of *Guitar Shop* also has really simple, and really cool, ways for wiring guitars too. Another great resource is YouTube. Just about anything you could want to do to a guitar has been chronicled there.

It has taken me a long time, but I did just about everything the hard way. Don't let anybody lock you into a certain style or configuration. Do what you want to do; that's the point! Don't spend an arm and a leg on anything, or I promise that you won't want to change it later. I'm also a firm believer in "it's not what you know, but who you know." Ask around, shop around, take your time, and with a little luck and some patience you will be as happy as I am! Happy pickin'.

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