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PROFILES

MEET THE MAKER: WALLACE DETROIT GUITARS



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“For me, the spirit of the city is really in making things.” Mark Wallace, owner of Wallace Detroit Guitars, is following a pattern long instilled by Motor City production: attention to detail. “You think about General Motors inventing the automatic transmission,

about Berry Gordy building an assembly line for music—that drove progress.”

Since launching in 2014, Wallace Detroit Guitars has crafted 65 guitars with wood sourced from historic places in Detroit, often tying into the city’s production landscape, such as the old Cadillac Factory on Connor Street. Like a recent creation—a pinewood guitar made out of wood from the former Detroit Fire Department headquarters downtown, now the boutique Foundation Hotel—every instrument has a story ingrained within.

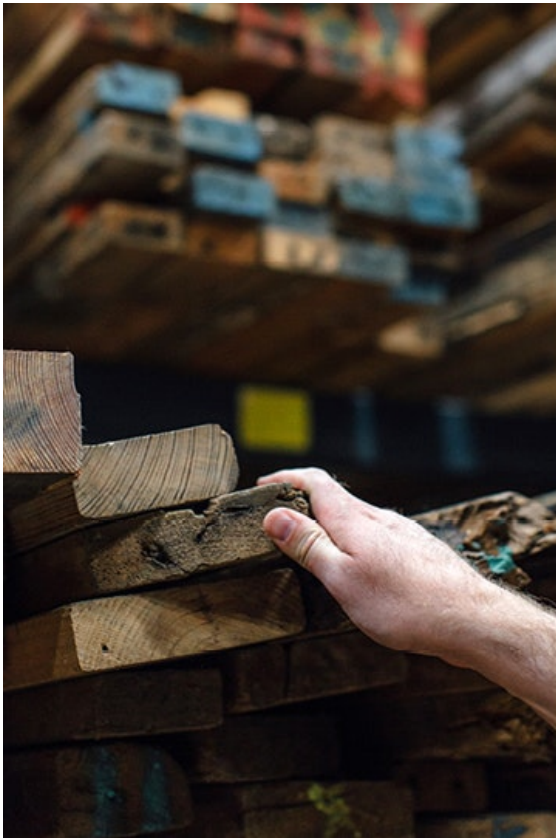


Mark Wallace (pictured above)

“Each guitar is like a fingerprint,” describes Wallace, who picked up an electric guitar at the age of 15. It was a \$75 pawn shop find with a mahogany body. “There are no two guitars that are ever the same. When a source of wood is done, when we run out of wood from that building, we’ll never have any more.”

For wood that would otherwise go into a landfill, Wallace Detroit Guitars has saved nearly 1,000 board feet from turning into waste, giving the materials a second chance at life as one-of-a-kind instruments.

Most wood, some upwards of 100 years old, comes from the Architectural Salvage Warehouse of Detroit, a nonprofit organization that provides training and employment to local residents.



Most wood used for the guitars comes from the Architectural Salvage Warehouse of Detroit (pictured above).

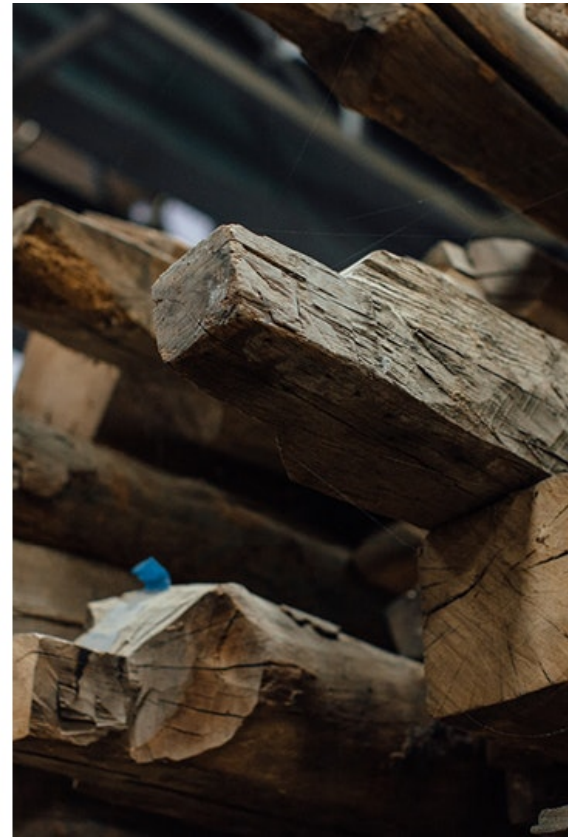
There, in a warehouse filled with Detroit-sourced wood stacked on shelves from top to bottom, people are taught how to pull nails, source the wood, and reclaim it. “I really like to get my wood from ASWD because they do so much good for the community,” says Wallace, 39, who lives in Corktown. “Their money goes into jobs, historic preservation—and they have amazing wood.”

Wallace, who is also president and CEO of Detroit Riverfront Conservancy, developed the guitar company using his background in real estate. “Somebody told me there was a warehouse full of reclaimed wood,” he recalls. “I went to tour the warehouse and there was a sample of a butcher block. I was looking at it and it hit me that, from the side, it was about the same width as an electric guitar.” With the help of a friend, he created his first guitars using bought necks and a little elbow grease.



Wallace received a grant from the Knight Arts Challenge, which funds creative ideas through the Knight Foundation, and it gave him a platform to turn his blooming idea into a business. "It really allowed me to think about something that would be much bigger."

Now, Wallace Detroit Guitars builds its own necks (all Michigan maple), with strings by D'Addario. The luthier used to make the guitars themselves, which are created in batches of five-to-10, is out in Kalamazoo. Each guitar has handmade pickups that are jazzed up to enhance rhythm, tone and range; the instruments lean a rock 'n' roll, country sound. "The age of the wood helps with that," Wallace explains. Old wood isn't easy to work with—you end up with a lot more scrap than new wood—but he says the end result is worth it.



Inside Architectural Salvage Warehouse, where wood is up to 100 years old.

Pick a Wallace Detroit Guitar up in your hands and you'll notice its sturdiness. The instruments are heavy and reflect in the light, with a logo on the headstock burned into the wood with a branding iron. "It's got a nice weight to it, and the sustain of the tone is very good."

The guitars run between \$2,800 to \$3,300 and can be customized. Batches have come from the old David Whitney Building downtown, now the Aloft Hotel—five of those were made—along with a group of 20 from the Cadillac Factory; 10 will be made out of DFD wood. "It's amazing to connect the automotive history," says Wallace. For one customer, he even crafted a guitar out of wood sourced from her grandmother's house. "I'm always looking for places with interesting stories or cool wood."



The variation of grain on each piece of salvaged wood creates the beautiful details found on Wallace Detroit Guitars.

Each guitar is finished with lacquer or tung oil and comes shipped in a hardshell leather case. “We want to make sure the age of the wood is really emphasized,” says Wallace—nicks and holes from nails are always left behind. Because pine and maple were the types of forest in the area, most wood is one of either. “We like to show the wood off.”



His customers are collectors and guitar players, but Wallace always prefers to sell to somebody who is going to play the instrument all the time. “I like that my company is making something that you can touch and feel,” he says, “because that’s really important.”



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