Ned Steinberger April 4, 2003
Joining Forces To Create "A Universal Fretboard."

Summing up Ned Steinberger's contribution to instrument design is not an easy task. Sure, you can talk about the headless Steinberger basses and guitars. You can mention the trans trem transposing tremolo system. There's his current line of electric bowed instruments but after talking with Ned for a while there's something else that comes out.

I asked Emmett what it was like to work with Ned Steinberger. He said, "Excellent. Ned is straightforward, thorough, he listens as much as he gives. He brought a lot of problem solving skills and a great imagination."

That describes Ned's contribution to instrument design in the late 20th and now early 21st century. Ned Steinberger designs instruments that reflect his attention to function, form, balance and substance over flash. Sure his instruments look great but more importantly, the sound great and play great and strive to put as little resistance as possible between artist and instrument.

Ned brought his straightforwardness, thoroughness, attention to detail and imagination into the Stick community and left a dynamic imprint and a wonderful new instrument behind.

The fruit of the collaboration between Emmett Chapman and Ned Steinberger was the NS Stick, an instrument designed to be tapped, as well as strummed and plucked using conventional techniques.

Emmett wanted to add a hybrid instrument to his line of dedicated tapping instruments, an instrument to bridge the gap between Stick and the guitar/bass. What better way to do this then to collaborate with one of the most innovative, imaginative and inventive bass/guitar builders around.

For a while now, there has been a hesitance among some guitar and bass players to pick up The Stick. I suspect it simply looks daunting. But the world of two-handed tapping is richer than the single note lines and ornamentations of countless rock and roll tappers.

The original idea behind the NS Stick was to bridge the gap for all stringed and fretted musical instrument players between tapping as accessory to ones playing and tapping as a full-fledged technique in its own right. With the NS Stick Emmett's method has crossed the threshold, bringing the world of tapping expression and counterpoint into any guitar or bass player's vocabulary.

The aim has been achieved, as Don Schiff, Gary Jibilian and many others both professionally and otherwise can attest.

And Ned Steinberger has left his mark—this time the percussive tap of a finger—on yet another part of the modern musical landscape.

Jim Reilly: Give me the quick overview of Ned Steinberger as instrument designer. How did you get started, what was the impetus?

Ned Steinberger: My field is design. I went to art school to pursue a career as a designer but I made my living as a cabinetmaker. I ended up getting involved with a co-op group in Brooklyn. There were several cabinetmakers sharing a space as well as Stuart Spector, the guitar builder. Stuart had people interested in a bass, he needed to get a model together and I just volunteered to see what I could come up with.

JR: Did you have any training in acoustics or instrument building?

NS: None whatsoever.

JR: So the first instrument was for Stuart Spector. It's still being made today is it not?

NS: That's correct.

JR: What was special about that bass that made it work for Stuart?

NS: My design work in furniture had been primarily in seating. Ergonomic considerations had always been very prominent in my mind. So basically the Spector bass has a sort of conventional neck-thru construction, we tapered the neck a little differently and we built the headstock a little differently. Nevertheless, the structure was kept within pretty clear tradition. Then I concentrated on the body styling and getting comfort to the body, getting it to feel as good as it could feel, that sort of thing.

JR: How did you evolve from making that one bass for Stuart into creating your own line of instruments?

NS: I was having that age-old problem you have with bass guitar: getting the instrument to balance well while dealing with the long neck and heavy tuners. So I put the tuners on the body, it was a great breakthrough for me and it drew me into the business. That was about 1976.

JR: Was that the primary reason for losing the headstock?

NS: That's the primary reason.

JR: What about the other aspects of those instruments, the small body designs etc, what was the logic behind that? What were you trying to achieve with those early instruments?

NS: I was looking to create a dynamic, brilliant sustain, exciting tone in an instrument that balanced as perfectly as possible and was as practical as possible.

JR: How were they initially received?

NS: It took artists, a few key artists to respond, that's really what was important. Then people in the press got interested. My original interest was to sell the design not to go into business making instruments but I couldn't interest anyone in that. Eventually I found some partners and we went into business ourselves to make them and people were excited about it.

It took us a while to get people to recognize what we were doing. At first some people found it difficult to take us seriously. This little, tiny, plastic bass with no tuning hardware on the end of the neck, even today that is something that some people are still not willing to accept.

I was very lucky. I had some very good partners. Hap Kuffner, Stan Jay and Bob Young came into partnership in this business. Hap in particular was a true believer in the idea and did a great deal to promote it.

JR: Who were some of the first artists to pick up your instruments and bring them to public attention?

NS: The first guy who really got it started was Andy West from the Dixie Dregs. He was instrumental in the whole thing, pardon the pun. Geddy Lee, Bill Wyman from the Rolling Stones were others, Jamaaladeen Tacuma was a really hot player.

The sound is interesting. I'm doing some new work for Gibson now and it gave me the chance to pull out an old Steinberger bass and make some comparisons. The sound of those instruments is very unique. Sometimes I forget a little how great it sounds.

JR: Which brings me to my next question. Ergonomics are one thing but if it didn't sound good then nobody would play it. What was it about the instruments that made the sound so versatile and rich?

NS: Essentially the all graphite fabrication gives a very lively, rich response. Very clear, detailed, the things you want in a bass. Clarity and definition are strong points of graphite. It depends how you use the material, in our case we built a very rigid structure. A lot of people who use graphite make a more flexible neck, which gives a more conventional sound. Our necks are extremely rigid and have a unique sound as a result.

JR: I was a guitar player before I switched to Stick fulltime and what I liked about your instruments was that the tone was so pure and clean and so versatile.

NS: It was very clean. On a guitar you really notice the difference, in my ears anyway, in the way a note starts. In a more flexible instrument or a wooden instrument, the note builds up a little bit, it doesn't just *start*. The notes are very fast and clean and well initiated.

JR: Which leads us to the NS Stick. How did the connection with Emmett come about?

NS: I met Emmett through Tony Levin. Tony has played Steinberger basses in the past and also a Stick of course. So that's how I first met Emmett.

JR: How did you decide to build an instrument together?

NS: Emmett called me. I think he saw that the market for tapping instruments wasn't fully encompassed by The Stick and that some kind of crossover instrument would be interesting. He felt that it might be constructive for us to work together on it, which is what we did.

JR: What did you bring to the equation?

NS: I brought, probably more than anything else, a fresh outlook to how you might make the instrument. Emmett's original idea was a more bass oriented Stick instrument. My approach was a more guitar *player*, bass *player* oriented Stick. So the NS Stick is designed to be tapped or plucked with the string spacing to accommodate that. All of this was worked out together of course. In the end, the standard tuning is very standard eight-string fourths tuning. I think it makes it more viable for a lot of players just to pick it up and play.

It was a good project for me because I like to figure things out. I'm not really a stylist primarily. I'm interested in how things work and how to make things work. For example, once you go from a headstock to a headless instrument and you make that big a change all of a sudden you have a whole new set of detailed problems to deal with. Solving those problems effectively is a big challenge I enjoy and a big part of my job.

JR: Your work seems to be constantly evolving. I'm thinking it would have been easy for you to just keep on making Steinberger basses and guitars like they were in 1986. You could have kept the rights to them and kept putting out a product that was successful but you sold the rights to Gibson and now you're building upright basses and cellos and other electric instruments.

I'm wondering why the impetus is there to continually redefine Ned Steinberger Designs?

NS: First of all if you're a designer/inventor, which is how I think of myself, by definition it involves developing new things. If you copy a Fender bass, it's not a new design. In my case I'm more interested in the entire instrument. I'm interested in pursuing a design as vigorously as I can and that means doing new things.

I sold Steinberger to Gibson because I really didn't want to run a company of that scale that much and the company was under considerable financial strain regardless of its apparent success in the marketplace. Suffice it to say it wasn't easy for me as a non-businessman to deal with the problems I had running a business and it was very attractive

to me to sell to people who could handle those things more effectively than I could, which freed up my time to do the design work that I really wanted to do in the first place.

Once the company was sold and I realized I needed to do my own thing. What was I going to do? Make a copy of a Steinberger bass and market that under some other name?

I don't think so!

Not only would I have been legitimately sued because I didn't have the right to do that, I didn't *want* to do that. So in that sense I was forced to reinvent myself. That's when I got involved with the upright bass, which seemed like a great product that wasn't competitive with any Steinberger products and which would also lead me in new directions.

The Steinberger instrument has a certain kind of aesthetic associated with it, a certain kind of no-holds-barred, take any technology, any invention you can find, an 'other instruments can be traditional but we're not' attitude.

The newer instruments take a little different approach. They're trying to be an embodiment of an advanced, forward looking electric instrument, not a copy of an acoustic instrument but nevertheless to be as accommodating to traditional values as is possible within the context of the development of the instrument for its own sake. It's a little bit of a different balance in the way of thinking about it.

JR: How was the balance struck with the NS Stick, the balance between a dedicated tapping instrument and an instrument that is strummed and plucked?

NS: Like anything else in this world, it's full of compromises.

The essential compromise is between some kind of ultimate tapping instrument, along the lines of what Emmett invented. The Chapman Stick is totally dedicated, a totally rethought instrument. In a lot of ways it may be akin to the original Steinberger bass no-holds-barred approach.

The idea of the NS Stick is to be more accessible to more people, an instrument that allows for techniques to be mixed with tapping rather than to be exclusively tapped.

A tapped instrument has all kinds of wonderful opportunities in the way that it's played that don't exist in a conventional guitar or bass, but there is always a price to be paid in just about anything you do.

The idea with the NS Stick is to be a universal fretboard. That's how I think of it, as a universal fretboard. The idea is for you to decide what you want to do with it. It's set up to pretty much to do it all.

JR: You've made some other revolutionary contributions, I'm thinking about the trans trem and the new moveable capo. Take me through some of those.

NS: When we came out with a guitar it was fixed bridge and there was a clamour for a tremolo and I just thought, if we're going to make a tremolo let's make all the strings stay in tune. I thought about it and experimented and said, within limits, yes we can so let's do it.

The capo evolved out of my interest in making extended neck instruments, particularly guitars. The idea is that you can add frets at either end of the neck at any time you want. There are an infinite number of frets that can go at either end of the neck, so if you add two frets at the end of the neck while leaving everything else the same, you have a D tuning and all the same tension and everything else on the neck as you would have in an E tuning two frets up. So if you have an extended neck, it's nice to be able to decide how much of it you want to use.

JR: Anything else you're particularly proud of?

NS: I have the new tuning system for our violin and viola, which is a self-clamping tuner. We have patents on that. There is the auto-trim tuner, marketed by D'addario, which is a conventional guitar tuner that cuts the string as you tune. I'm developing a strap system for cello and double bass so you can wear them. There are other things in development that I really can't mention.

A big part of what we're doing now is working with great people in the Czech Republic. We're getting things produced very cost effectively, very high quality stuff that we can offer at reasonable prices. There's this great old-world craftsmanship. We're very excited about our connection in the Czech Republic.

JR: What is next for NS Designs?

NS: We have a new bowed instrument that we're working on that's very exciting. I can't go into details but it's going to be unique, a new instrument in the string family. Another area of focus is new products for Gibson. I have a new five-year contract with Gibson for Steinberger products and there will be a new guitar out before too long and more products to follow.

JR: Any plans for more work with Emmett?

NS: Not at the moment but it's always an open door as far as I'm concerned. I think Emmett's has his hands full getting the NS Stick out to people and so when that gets moved out we might work on new models some day.

JR: How about putting a trans trem on it?

NS: I suppose you could put it on four strings. I don't think you could practically put it on all eight but you could put it on four and that would be very interesting in a lot of ways. I think maybe even more interesting than putting it on all eight. It would be really interesting to have a note fixed and a note being bent against it.

Be sure to check out the full instrument line at NS Designs.
There's lots of great music clips including Don Schiff on the NS Stick.