

Ned Steinberger – Redesigning the world of musical instruments

By Jim Reilly

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Few people in the world of musical instrument design have had a bigger impact or a broader influence than Ned Steinberger. The son of a Nobel Prize winning physicist and a celebrated American artist, Steinberger fell into instrument design rather serendipitously a little over forty years ago. At the time, Ned was designing furniture and custom cabinetry at a Brooklyn woodwork's co-op. A casual conversation with fellow co-op member, instrument maker Stuart Spector, resulted in Ned designing the Spector NS2 bass. It was Ned's first instrument design and it remains Spector's best-selling bass guitar to this day.

Once bitten by the instrument design bug, Ned was hooked. Although he will be the first to tell you that he is not a musician, that perspective freed Ned to see bass guitar design through the lens of comfort and ergonomics. Indeed, his next design, the Steinberger L2 bass, rewrote the rulebook and redefined the possibilities for guitar and bass design. The Steinberger bass looked like nothing that had come before. For starters, it had no headstock! Almost everything about the instrument was new. The small rectangular body and headless neck were molded in one piece from space age carbon fiber – minimalistic in every way. Every way, that is, except the sound! As soon as players heard the bass they were hooked. Guitars with a similar design soon followed the bass and before long a literal who's who of musicians in the 1980s were playing Steinberger basses and guitars. Sting, Eddie Van Halen, The Rolling Stones' Bill Wyman, Mike Rutherford, John Entwistle from The Who, Rush's Geddy Lee, Tony Levin, and David Bowie are just a few of the countless players who defined 80s music with Steinberger instruments.

Never one to rest on his laurels, in 1987, Ned sold The Steinberger Sound Company to the Gibson Guitar Corporation. After a few years working for Gibson, he set out on his own again with completely new instruments and designs. This time, the focus was on reinventing the possibilities for electric bowed instruments. Ned's first instrument under the banner of his new company, NS Design, was an electric upright bass, as revolutionary in design and sound as the Steinberger Bass – and musicians greeted it with equal enthusiasm. Since 1990, the stable of NS Design electric bowed instruments has grown to include a violin, viola, cello, double bass, the unique 'Omni-Bass' (which combines the features of an upright bass with the size and feel of a bass guitar) and the headless Radius electric bass. An equally impressive and growing list of players perform and record with NS Design instruments including Paul Simon's bassist Bakithi Kumalo, Tony Levin, chart topping band Clean Bandit's Grace Chatto, Laurie Anderson, Les Claypool and Living Colour's Doug Wimbish.

These days, Ned's influence stretches far beyond guitars and basses. While NS Design continues to set the standard for bowed electric instruments, collaborations with fellow instrument designers like, Emmett Chapman and David Gage, and with companies like D'Addario, Martin, and Gibson have resulted in new instruments and all kinds of music related products such as tuners, capos, strap locks, pickups and pretty much any aspect of instrument design one could imagine. Simply walk into any music store and look around. Anytime you see an 'NS' you can thank Ned Steinberger.