The String Theorist

From his Maine workshop, instrument designer Ned Steinberger is reinventing the tools of music's superstars

WRITTEN BY JIM REILLY • PHOTOGRAPHED BY ERIC ROTH

Ned Steinberger's workshop in Nobleboro, Maine, stands beside the family home he shares with wife, Denise, and their two teenage sons. Originally a barn, the structure dates to the mid-1800s. After years of neglect, it was torn down in the early 1980s but rebuilt on the same foundation to the original specifications. In 1997, when the Steinbergers moved in, Ned, a musical instrument designer, modernized. He added a second floor that serves as a listening room and sound laboratory. On the main floor, which received only a few necessary modifications, violin necks, electric-guitar pickups, and projects both in progress and set aside fight for space with clamps, jigs, and soldering irons. "My work spaces have always been practical in nature," he says. "They're certainly not neat."

From the outside, the shop blends into the rural Maine landscape. On the inside, it looks like countless other woodshops — but looks can be deceiving. This is a laboratory where, with the analytical mind of a scientist and the creative heart of an artist, Steinberger pushes the boundaries of musical instrument design.

More simply, Steinberger makes tools, some of the best of their kind. His tools have found their way into the hands of some of the world's best-known musicians, who in turn have created every kind of music imaginable and some that defies belief.

DESIGNED BY NED Steinberger in Nobleboro, Maine, and handcrafted in the Czech Republic, the CR 5-string violin (ABOVE LEFT) merges Old World artistry with 21st-century materials and technologies. Steinberger holds a prototype NS Design electric guitar (ABOVE RIGHT). Although the guitar is not on the market yet, it's already winning followers. Rock icon Steve Miller ordered six.

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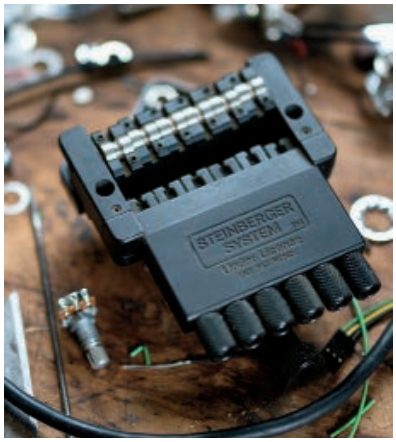
STEINBERGER STANDS in front of his workshop. FACING PAGE, FROM TOP: An elegant NS Design headstock; Steinberger's guitar bridge with a tremolo system that alters the pitch of all strings equally and stays in tune regardless of the abuse players like Eddie Van Halen throw at it; the headless design concept for which Steinberger is best known in the musical-instrument world.

When discussing Steinberger's instruments, renowned bassist Tony Levin, who has shared the stage with artists ranging from Peter Gabriel to King Crimson to John Lennon, says, "If you're a bass player and you go into a studio and you play just one note, one big, low note, and the engineer goes 'Wow — I love this,' and the artist goes 'Wow — I love this,' and the producer says, 'I'm so glad I got you, Tony,' it's the sound of the instrument, not me." That's the Steinberger sound.

Much like his workshop, which is built on its centuries-old foundation, Steinberger took the fundamental aspects of acoustic bowed instruments and evolved their design so that they are every bit as powerful onstage as electric guitars and basses. His stable of 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 guitar. Awards and industry recognition have been constant since the first electric upright in 1990. The Radius bass guitar recently won "Best in



Show" at this year's National Association of Music Merchants winter trade show.

As a teenager in his father's basement woodshop in their Hastings-on-Hudson, New York, home, Steinberger eschewed plans in favor of creativity. If he wanted to make a chair, he'd take one apart, study it from all angles, and use that as the jumping-off point for his own model. He learned

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STEINBERGER DISPLAYS HIS WAV 4-string cello. Its Coform fingerboard, made by pairing maple and acrylic, allows for better articulation. He is in his warehouse, where NS instruments are ready to go after a final quality check.

by doing and questioning, always asking why and how things worked. He came across that mind-set honestly. His father, physicist Jack Steinberger, is a Nobel Prize recipient. His mother, Joan Beauregard, was a celebrated artist. As with any true inventor, it's impossible to separate the science of his work from its art. Both drive his passion for exploring questions of sound, form, and function.

Originally a furniture designer and custom cabinetmaker, Steinberger made his very first instrument, a bass guitar, for luthier Stuart Spector in 1976. It is still Spector's most popular model. Next, he made electric guitars and basses under his own name. Some of rock's best musicians, including Sting, Eddie Van Halen, The Rolling Stones' Bill Wyman, Mike Rutherford, The Who's John Entwistle, Rush's Geddy Lee, and David Bowie, played Steinberger guitars. In 1987, Ned sold the rights to those instruments, along with the brand name Steinberger, to the Gibson guitar company.

That sale allowed Ned to create a new company, NS Design, and to go back to

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his first love: designing innovative instruments. NS Design's work grace the stages of an equally impressive and growing list of musicians. Some, like virtuosos Charles Yang, the DaPonte String Quartet, and David Darling, value the instruments' ability to sound like their traditional acoustic counterparts. A Paul Simon bassist, Bakithi Kumalo, values their unique voice. "I want people to be able to recognize that it's me playing right away," he says. Others, like Laurie Anderson, Margot Lane, chart-topping pop band Clean Bandit's Grace Chatto, Les Claypool, and Living Colour's Doug Wimbish, love the way the instruments can take on effects like distortion and reverb and sound every bit as massive as Jimi Hendrix's electric guitar.

NS Design's 51 models, ranging in price from $849 for an entry-level violin to $7,200 for a top-of-the-line upright bass, are made in the Czech Republic and Asia. This leaves Steinberger free to keep asking questions and pushing boundaries in his Nobleboro shop. As Steinberger says, "It's a continuing quest!" ☗

NS Design; *thinkns.com*. ***Steinberger: A Story of Creativity and Design*** by Jim Reilly will be published this fall by TwoHanded Press.

Sean Litchfield Photography

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