

the ToneQuest Report™

The Player's Guide to Ultimate Tone

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K-Line Guitars



Thanks again to another ToneQuest subscriber, it was suggested that we approach K-Line Guitars founder

Chris Kroenlein with a request to develop a review article. After a few e-mail exchanges we ultimately decided that receiving three instruments for review would be far better than one, and we're happy to present three exceptional guitars built by Chris for your consideration. The man does exceptional work, and we asked him to describe how he began building guitars, and what makes them uniquely special. Our reviews follow.

TQR: How did you first become involved with playing, building and/or repairing guitars?

I started playing the guitar at about age 10. Two of my uncles would clear out my father's auto body shop every weekend and have jam sessions, mostly country music. Of course I wanted to be a part of the scene. My Uncle Don loaned me his old Gibson J-45 that had such a neck bow that the strings sat about a half inch off the board, yet I was instantly hooked. I was also a kid who needed to know how things worked, so everything I owned was taken to the bench and methodically disassembled. I suppose the days spent hanging at my dad's auto body shop fostered this a bit. It is where I also refined my painting skills.

As I grew older and became more interested in playing during high school and college, I began to realize that the guitars I pulled off the wall at the local guitar shop were just not right.



I could not put my finger on it at first, but I knew something could be better. As with everything I owned, I had to tear it apart. I began realizing that there was a lack of a neck angle to my "blackie". It made sense that a couple of business cards would fix the issue with tension as well as resonance. After all, a guitar is about angles. This was the beginning of my part swapping days. I would throw this

neck on that body and learn from the results. Often times the result was no better, but I seemed to always get a nugget of knowledge to use the next time around. As I grew older I also had more disposable income to get pre-made bodies and necks and make a go at it. I started with mainly Fender clone stuff as the parts were readily available. So I suppose you could say that my interest came from a player who wanted it the way I wanted it.

TQR: How did your knowledge expand and progress in terms of acquiring practical, hands-on experience? Were there any mentors that guided your progression and learning?

Most of my knowledge in repair as well as building came from the wonderful world of books, videos, and the mighty internet. Stew-Mac has many great resources to get you started in the right direction but ultimately experience teaches you to be consistent. A highly respected local tech in St. Louis named Skip Goetz was my initial go-to guy. He was extremely helpful in teaching me the finer points, to nut slot cutting, fret work, and overall setups. His instruction was instrumental in moving my knowledge forward. Of course, as with all great instruction, personal preference is involved in setting up a guitar. This has been refined over the years as well as understanding what people want in their own set ups. The finish work was taught to me by my father in his auto shop.

TQR: And how did this hands-on experience unfold and develop?



Most of my early builds were an exercise in failure, and then doing a post mortem to understand what went wrong. I realized that swapping parts around would not resolve some of the inherent design and fit issues that I was encountering. Money and time were the two things that I was short of. During college I devoted the little free time I had to playing music

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rather than working on guitars. After graduating I got into the pharmaceutical industry, and suddenly I had some disposable income to begin building guitars from various pre-made parts, but still I found myself not yet satisfied.

Around the late '90's into around 2002, I began sketching out some design changes. I started with the basic designs but had also recognized the shortcomings of a flat neck pocket and narrow fingerboard widths. I probably went through 20 blanks until I figured out the best angle to slope the pocket that would not affect the aesthetics of the classic designs. This was my first hard lesson in wood quality as well. The first K-Line guitar was about ten pounds and it was dead as a door nail. It was obvious that I would have to share in my



peers' knowledge of wood and become a student once again. These friends taught me the finer aspects of grain patterns, moisture content, and wood resonance. The end result was a guitar

that nailed that sweet spot consistently, without fail. Necks were a disaster at first. From about 2002 till 2006, we worked to refine the designs and the machining while I continued to work at a pharmaceutical sales management job that was sucking the life out of me. Finally, in 2006 the designs were done and the end results were outstanding. In 2009 I made a decision to take K-Line to a new level and left my "day" job to follow my dream. During this time and on into 2010, I was using off the shelf, licensed necks built in a factory in Japan as I made certain that I was ready to bring the K-Line necks to market. The aftermarket necks were and continue to be a quality product, but they needed a lot of TLC to get them up to my standards, and they lacked options. This buy-and-modify business model allowed me to gain a reputation as a builder while working towards the ultimate goal of launching the unique K-Line models.

TQR: When and how did the inspiration for the various guitars we see today develop?

I initially started with the single cut and double cut classics. Parts were readily available and produced great guitars. The current models include:

San Bernardino – This is a hybrid that utilizes an offset body shape along with a neck angle close to that of a Les Paul, which allows the use of a TOM style bridge that sets up perfectly. Along with the 25.5" scale, the classic dual pickup platform produces a slightly different tone, feel, and playability than what most people are accustomed to. I always loved



the Jazz-master for the way it feels hanging on you,

but I never got along with the rest of it. This model is built for comfort and was inspired by some old and new designs. On this model I use alder or ash for the body matched to the specific fret board wood to get the desired tone. Each is finished with code-specific DuPont paints based on the classic colors. All K-Lines are finished with nitro and no poly undercoats. I believe this adds to the open, woody tone. "It just breathes" to borrow a phrase from many.



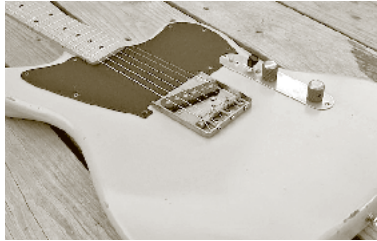
Springfield – What can I say that hasn't already been said about this style? I don't think you can re-invent the wheel – only put better tires on it. This platform follows the classic design from Leo with the exception of the neck pocket angle. The necks are a bit wider all the way down which helps keep the strings spread out and avoid that nasty string pull off, even with a 2 7/32" trem spread. The pickups are carefully chosen to match the body and neck woods. After trying almost every pickup imaginable, I think I have found the best representation of a vintage tone. The hardware is all Gotoh for great consistency and functionality. I offer a Wilkinson steel block trem that features a push-in arm which provides presence and clarity without compromising tone. I tried trem systems at three times the cost that lack the warmth of the Wilkinson. It just works, and the push-in arm eliminates thread wobble. Oh, and a 2 1/8" spread to boot. This grabs the pole pieces on the bridge pickup much better.



The Truxton is the base name for the single cut variety. One change was to find the right bridge that could produce the right balance of twang and low end. Most bridges available today are thin and made from inferior metals. I have my plates made to my specs (bit thicker) and the saddles come from Jim at C & J Tooling in Buffalo. He makes my saddles out of rolled brass, which produces cleaner

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highs without becoming brittle. Bodies are mainly made from ash and alder with an occasional pine slab. I use the same treatment with the neck pocket angle in all my guitars. The Special model is a great platform that uses a Hipshot hard-tail bridge that produces a resonance that I have not found in any other bridge. The six saddles allow perfect intonation and produce a nice warm tone. This platform can handle P90's, mini-humbuckers and Firebird pickups. Body woods are generally ash, but some alder is used as well. I have also used African mahogany from time to time.



The idea for the Texola came from the comfort of the offset body with a familiar pickup/bridge configuration. This body style is just so comfortable and the

extra wood creates a slightly bigger bass response. These guitars are a bit harder to choose the proper wood for, since you have to balance tone with weight. Many guitar players are working musicians that gig many nights a week and for up to four hours at a time. A ten pound guitar tends to wear a person out. The Texola was developed mainly from the various custom orders that I had built in the past – a customer-developed guitar that always held a special place for me.

TQR: What are some of the other shortcomings in typical production guitars that you have set out to eliminate or improve on, and how?



The main thing is consistency. The biggest frustration that many people have is running the racks at the stores to find the “it” factor at a reasonable

price point. The thing that got me into building guitars was to produce guitars that can be enjoyed by the ‘home’ player and the working musician alike. Attention to detail is my main focus – specifically the feel of the instrument. I have often said that a certain guitar could have “it” if maybe the neck had a nice worn in feel. I like to roll my fingerboard edges over by hand, which provides the feel of an old guitar. Ultimately, what is the first impression of a guitar after the aesthetics are taken into account? Everyone grabs the guitar by the neck. This is the start of the love-it or hate-it assessment. Your judgment can be clouded by the smallest things which means you walk out of the store empty handed. Is the guitar set up properly? This point can lose a sale very quickly but is also very easily remedied. Every one of my guitar undergoes a three

step process to ensure that they arrive ready to play. Pickups? I found that the pickups I use are often the same brands and models of pickups that people use to upgrade a mass-produced guitar after they buy it. I carefully match the pickups to the guitar to achieve the target tone. Sometimes this means swapping pickups out until it is just right. Customer Service? A big factor in the decision process for most. When you call K-Line I am the one who picks up the phone. Well I do... when I can, that is. I love to talk guitars as much as build them, so beware of that. I strive to be as available as possible. Price point? My goal is to build a superior instrument at a reasonable price that most working musicians can afford.

TQR: How do you approach wiring, pickup specs and tone specifically?

With wiring, I try to use the ‘less is more theory.’ I have dabbled in multifunctional switches, push/pull pots, toggles, etc. Ultimately my customers’ feedback was that many liked the novelty of it at first but later resorted back to what they knew and trusted. I have experimented with many tone pot modifications that had a certain ‘cool factor,’ but they also seem to rob some of the natural color of the circuit. I have done endless experiments combining various caps and pot values, again, resorting back to the tried and true. Sometimes, simple pictures are best.



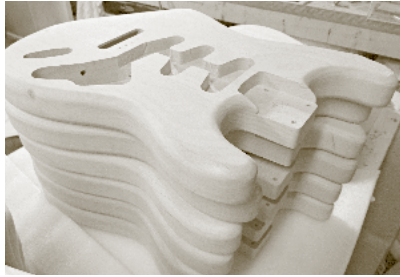
Regarding pickups, every guitar has a target voice. After the wood is selected and matched, the pickups are chosen on the basis of how they will accentuate

or compliment the desired tone for that model of guitar. For example, if the order calls for a nice woody tone on a Springfield, I go for the model X. If I need to add a bit of mids and some bite, I choose another set. I have a recipe in mind, and then it just comes down to selecting the right ingredients. One big factor on a custom build is to speak with the customer on the phone and learn as much about their playing style, amps, effects, and what they want to hear. You sometimes have to challenge a customer’s perceived idea to make sure they get what they want, and not get caught up in a brand name or fall for a crazy idea or tip they read somewhere on the Internet.

TQR: How many instruments have you built to date, and how have they evolved or been improved/changed since their introduction?

As far as an exact number, wow, I never really tracked it

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during the early trial and error years. Things really started to accelerate when I began building guitars full time in 2009, and I've built and shipped around 500 since. Keep in mind that I was and still am a one-man show. The guitars have really evolved mainly in the area of fit and finish. In the early days I did mostly aged and distressed stuff because that was where the market was. Those guitars did not need the really time consuming aspects of a perfect finish. As the market has shifted away from the beat up look, I spend many more man hours on the finish work. I consider myself lucky as I literally grew up with a spray gun in my hand. My father was very instrumental in teaching me about different kinds of paints and how best to apply them, and I have also refined the process. Once you get a formula for success, then it is just a matter of repetition. I have also learned to think for myself and always remain a student. You have to keep your eyes and ears open and always look into ideas for yourself and do not just cast them aside because they don't fit in with conventional wisdom. I do not like being labeled as a master anything. I am a student first and will always be. The design changes in neck angles came from many years of tweaking things a little at a time.

TQR: Let's review the options that are available (fingerboard radius, neck shapes, finishes, fret wire, nut material, pickups, wood types, finishes, etc).

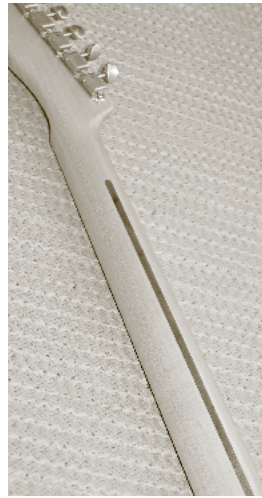
Since I have really just launched the new models and refined the designs, I'm keeping things simple working within formulas that produce a predictable and repeatable outcome...



Necks: Most radii and contours are available. The stock guitars all come with a 10" radius and medium-U contour (.860" at the first fret). The fingerboard woods I use are maple one piece, maple cap, and rosewood slab. I can also use boards like Pau Ferro and ebony. At this time I have made a decision to not offer neck woods like AAA flame and birdseye. These are simply diseased woods and my guitars carry a warranty that figured wood won't always support. Fret wire is Jescar .095" x .047". Most standard sizes are available on a custom order basis.

Nut: Bone mostly. I also like to use Tusq on certain applications. I have used Ivory as well.

Body woods: Alder and swamp ash are the primary tone woods. Other woods will be available on a custom basis soon. Never hurts to ask. I can accommodate most requests.



Necks: Flat sawn, rift sawn and quarter sawn maple. I plan to expand this in the future as the brand continues to become established. I can use mahogany in certain circumstances.

Pickups: Mainly Lollar and Klein. Others can be accommodated on a custom basis. And no, I do not have a favorite!

Finishes: We offer full nitro based finishes in the classic colors. These can be a hand rubbed Time Capsule finish, discreetly aged to a Klostet Klassic finish, or worked into a distressed finish. If customers can provide some info on a car color they like, I can usually find the formula for it. We do also offer an acrylic urethane clear coat for those who prefer it. The finishes are thin and settle into the grain over time. I have found that as long as the film thickness is thin, it really does not make much difference what the actual finish is. I do not use polyester or polyurethane on any builds, even as a base coat.

TQR: What are the most significant challenges facing independent builders today, and what do you wish to accomplish in the future?

For builders who want to grow their business beyond a certain geographic region, I think one of the most significant challenges is finding a way to get your instruments into prospective players' hands. Twenty years ago, builders did not even have the web to get the word out. Now, with handhelds and laptops, cutting through the clutter is a challenge. I have decided to turn a larger percentage of my profits to spreading the word, and I am expanding our dealer network at a rapid pace, including a new distributor in the UK. We are also looking very closely at Japan. There are also traveling demos available for people who do not have a chance to play a K-Line at a nearby shop, but you'll have to be patient since the list is very long. I also work closely with many session players and touring artists to gain more national exposure. Up until this point my business has grown from word of mouth through various online forums, past customers and a handful of guitar shops that have been supportive of my craft. In addition to getting more of the unique K-Line guitars into the marketplace, growing the K-Line brand is a primary goal for 2011, and I am currently developing some new set neck models. I'll start with some basic flat body designs, with the first to be

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introduced by the end of this year. Expanding bass guitars is a work in process as well, since I currently only build them on a custom basis. Another aspiration is to become more self sufficient and vertically integrated. I currently work with some great suppliers, but it can be nerve wracking or downright maddening when you can't get components fast enough or consistently enough to finish work on schedule. Maybe that's more like the five year plan... I've got my hands pretty full right now.

K-Line Review

As we said in our introduction to this edition of the Quest, buying guitars is especially tough if you don't have the luxury of playing them first. Not so long ago the very idea would have been unimaginable, save for the brave souls that first patronized Red Bank Guitars, who would mail the *original* guitar aficionados a typewritten list of vintage guitars for sale every month. Something tells us those prescient tonehounds were not collecting Macanudos, Rolexes and Porsches... Further complicating your life as a prospective buyer, it has become nearly impossible to stay abreast of the number of small custom builders working today. Why? Like the amplifier business, the availability of parts in small quantities has spawned a robust and constantly changing cottage industry populated by small builders, many of whom are inspired to build guitars to a standard that was unavailable when they were scouring music stores as players themselves. Chris Kroenlein impresses us as one of those who is one of us – a player who would pick up a guitar and wonder, “Why couldn't they have made it *this* way? It would have been so much better...” We received a K-Line Truxton, Springfield and San Bernardino for review, and while all three guitars are quite different in terms of construction and design, they also share features that we found uniquely appealing.

Truxton



The Truxton is Kronlein's take on a Tele, and while you can order this guitar with traditional Tele-style pickups and bridge, ours was equipped with dual Klein '50s wind' P90s and a very cool Hipshot bridge. The body is made from ash with an interesting grain pattern revealed beneath the tobacco burst finish, yielding a 6.7 pound featherweight. We're betting it's the K-Line necks that

owners of these guitars rave about the most, because the neck carve, rolled fingerboard edges and fret work are exceptional in concept and execution, and very much unlike anything you're apt to find in a production instrument. The maple neck on the Truxton is a full U shape with plenty of depth and

shoulder to promote resonance and sustain, but it stops short of being cumbersome and unwieldy. It just feels right, as do the medium frets and the artfully rolled fingerboard edges. In fact, all three K-Line guitars immediately impressed us as being exceptionally, *supremely* playable in terms of the overall feel of the neck and setup. It's rare that we pick up a guitar and not find something that needs to be changed or adjusted, or that we wish had been done differently with the design, but we happily played the K-Lines pretty much as is. The Truxton sounds like a great Tele in all three pickup positions, but the P90s seem to fill in the middle frequencies a bit more with a little less zing and twang. It's a great hybrid tone that leaves you free to cover a lot of musical space that won't automatically be pegged as having originated from a Tele, but you'll still do so with plenty of swagger and attitude when required.

San Bernardino



It seems as if the contoured offset body style introduced in the original Jazzmaster has fallen into fashion with a lot of builders lately, which is interesting, since the Jazzmaster was never one of Leo's greatest hits, although it did better than the Jaguar. We understand, because we have always felt that the Jazzmaster was an underrated guitar. The surf green K-Line San Bernardino also possesses the

slippery, made-to-order fit that the body shape suggests, but this is where any similarity to a Fender ends. The nickel stop tailpiece, ABR-1 style bridge and Lollar '60s kindle memories for us of a non-reverse Firebird's penetrating voice, although with the San Bernardino you're holding a maple and rosewood slab board neck bolted to an ash body that renders a super light guitar weighing just 6.75 pounds. Like the Truxton, the San Bernardino is all player, with a perfectly rounded neck shape, smoothed over edges, standard medium frets and a dark rosewood slab fingerboard. The Lollar '60s wind P90s really do create a bit of a Firebird vibe with a hint of Stratocaster clarity in the San Bernardino – another unique hybrid voice that suits many different styles of music without many obvious limitations. The overall tone is bright in all three positions with deep bass richly rolling off the wound strings from the neck P90. Equally good for rhythm and soloing, this would also be a *super* slide guitar...

The Springfield

The familiar classic design of the Springfield suggests nothing new or innovative on the surface, but playing it reveals a superior instrument enhanced with the kind of thoughtful features that experienced guitarists will appreciate. Painted in a perfect shade of deep Lake Placid Blue, Kroenlein's version

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is again distinguished by its exceptional feel. Weighing 7.4 pounds, the Springfield's voice is big and rich – much more so than the strident tone of a lightweight swamp ash Strat with a maple maple neck, for example. We're not suggesting there is anything wrong with that classic combination, it just creates a different voice, while the Springfield possesses a weightier tone with its alder body, maple neck, rosewood slab fingerboard and Lollar Dirty Blonde pickups and bridge Special. For those

of you who have been frustrated in your search for a Strat bridge pickup that isn't too thin and razor sharp, the Special solves that problem while still producing the proper thwack with the middle and bridge combined. The Springfield also



departs from vintage specs by offering a tone control for the bridge pickup. The Wilkinson bridge plate, saddles and tremolo apparatus are a very high-quality alternative to stock Strat parts, and the push-in trem arm completely eliminates the sloppy feel of a traditional threaded arm, while still remaining loose enough to be swung out of the way without flopping around. Even if a K-Line isn't in

your future, the Wilkinson rig might oughta be... At the risk of sounding repetitive, the neck shape is perfect – a healthy U shape with very little taper, finished with an ultra-smooth matte amber nitro finish. By comparison, the neck on a typical Fender Custom Shop '60 Strat will be shallower below the



5th fret, gradually increasing in size to approximate the depth of the K-Line above the 5th fret.

The single most compelling selling point we can offer in recommending Chris Kronlein's guitars is for us, the most important – the part you play. Pickups can be swapped, but as Delta Moon guitarist Mark Johnson has discovered so often when attempting

to assemble a 'parts' Tele or Strat, the task of finding an agreeable neck with the right fingerboard and fretwork to meet your personal preferences is grossly underestimated. It's also the single most important part of the guitar that ultimately enables us to form an impression of an instrument at the exclusion of nearly everything else. In addition to his exceptional finish work and parts selection, Chris Kronlein just seems to understand how to craft an extraordinarily playable guitar, and we can't think of anything more valuable or desirable in a custom built instrument that also happens to be very reasonably priced. Quest forth...TQ

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