



SoundWood Jam Combines Music and Sustainability

By Stacey Fowler, Science Interchange Reporter

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An exciting music series has been launched in Mill Valley to educate the public about the critical link between music and trees.

"The woods that are used to make musical instruments come from all over the world," said Robert Garner, U.S. Program Director for the SoundWood program of Fauna and Flora International. He explained how just one guitar, for example, could have a fingerboard made of rosewood, a body made of cedar and a neck constructed from maple. And many of the woods used in musical instrument manufacture, particularly the hardwoods, come from tropical rainforests in South America, Asia, Africa. "So musical instruments are really ambassadors of nature," noted Garner.

The SoundWood Jam will take place on the last Tuesday of each month at the historic Sweetwater Saloon in Mill Valley. According to Garner, the series was initiated for a variety of reasons. The primary intent was to present a music series where people could "just come out and enjoy and celebrate what trees have to do with music as well as give musicians and music lovers a chance to learn where woods come from, what woods are used to make instruments, and what are some of the progressive initiatives that are being implemented by a number of manufacturers to make a difference and use environmentally-sensitive woods," said Garner. SoundWood also wants to bring attention to both well-known manufacturers and independent luthiers that are using sustainably-harvested woods to build their instruments. The series will feature instruments donated by Gibson Guitars, Modulus Guitars, Martin Guitars, and Drum Solo.

Garner said that the musical instrument industry uses a significant amount of wood including many endangered woods such as ebonies, rosewoods, and mahoganies. SoundWood works directly with the timber and music industries to help them source these woods and identify small mills here in the U.S. and internationally in an effort to help manufacturers find sustainably harvested, reclaimed, and certified woods to suit their needs. Additionally, SoundWood continually seeks out woods that could serve as substitutes for the more rare traditional woods used in musical instruments.

But there is mindset among manufacturers and musicians that must be overcome. Traditional woods have been chosen for their workability, appearance, and tonal properties and there is some reluctance to replace them with what might be considered by some as inferior woods. "But there are alternative species that will meet the density, the feel, the physical and tonal properties that those woods provide," said Garner.

"The awareness of certified woods now is very similar to what people thought about organic foods maybe 15 years ago," said Rich Lasner, President of Modulus Guitars. He continued, "They knew it existed, it had it's own funny little area on the shelf in the supermarket and it cost, they thought, quite a bit more than what they would consider regular food."

Greg Gaylord, owner of DrumSolo in Novato, said he decided to use certified and reclaimed woods in the manufacture of many of his custom snare drums simply because it seemed to him to be the right thing to do. He's found that by replacing the traditional maple with tropical exotics that he gets through EarthSource (formerly Eco-Timber) of Berkeley, CA he's able to produce drums that are superior in terms of both sound and aesthetics.

"I don't think I've jeopardized anything by any means - we get beautiful woods and beautiful sounds - I think it's been an improvement in the product," said Gaylord. "The one obstacle I encounter is that the market will often think you're using a lesser wood," he continued, "but once they get a hold of it and hear it and play it, I think they realize that we're not compromising anything by doing it the way we do it."

Gaylord said he anticipates that the SoundWood Jam series will be a powerful way to alter the public's perception and understanding of green instrument building and sustainability issues in general. "If people know about it and understand it, then they may actually go into the stores and ask for sustainable forest products," he said. Gaylord feels that many people are ill informed about sustainable forest products and that educating the public could lead to more availability of certified forestry products in the marketplace. "If they know about it and they can hear these instruments and go 'Hey, these sound great and they're coming out of certified forest,' that's a win-win situation for everybody," said Gaylord.

Indeed, music does stand to provide an excellent platform for raising awareness about certified wood and sustainability issues. "Probably the biggest presence that wood has in the marketplace is through furniture," said Dick Boak, who handles communications for Martin Guitars. "I don't know how well furniture does as a vehicle for educating people because I don't know how excited people get about it," he continued, "but people get really excited about guitars and music."

Garner is hoping that people will get excited about the Jam. "All the players in the house band will actually be playing on certified and reclaimed wood instruments," he said. In addition to good music, each Jam will feature one of the instruments and an explanation of how it was made and where the woods came from. The Jam will provide information about the certification process and local availability of featured instruments.

A unique aspect of the Jam is that music lovers and musicians will be encouraged to join in the music-making. "We'll give local musicians a chance to come out and play on these instruments so they can touch and feel them and know that they're the best thing going," said Garner.

"Environmental issues are a big thing for us," said Becky Steere, owner of Sweetwater Saloon. "We do anything we can to better the planet and the fact that SoundWood is doing that with a focus on guitars, which of course we use every night at Sweetwater, we just thought it was a perfect fit," she continued.

RESOURCES

For more info: www.soundwood.org or call Sweetwater at (415) 388-2820. All proceeds to benefit SoundWood.