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by David Fleischer | Jul 23, 2010 - 4:08 PM

Vaughan guitar maker strums way to top

Mike Carparelli never could have imagined one of his guitars could be one of the most valuable ever sold.

The Maple luthier, 44, has been making his own electric guitars for five years, but the company is poised to take a big step into the spotlight. Ten of their guitars will be painted by famous artists, signed by musicians and celebrities and auctioned off later this year to raise millions for charity.

The charity effort is one component of the Imagine Concert, a mega-festival scheduled for Toronto's Downsview Park Labour Day weekend.

Only five years ago Mr. Carparelli was an amateur guitar player working as a personal trainer.

"I was just an 18-year-old tinkering, dreaming about being a rock star. Then the real job took over," he says.

He was disappointed in the service from his own axe, making him realize the potential in doing things differently; constructing guitars from parts purchased piecemeal.



Vaughan guitar maker strums way to top. Mike Carparelli of Maple with one of his guitars. *Staff Photo/SJOERD WITTEVEEN*

"I was selling them as fast as I could make them, on eBay," he recalls.

By 2006 he had opened two shops, eventually finding it easier to worry about assembly and distribution, leaving sales to others. The guitars can now be found at shops around the world, although the company maintains a warehouse in Barrie to which musicians come to sample the wares.

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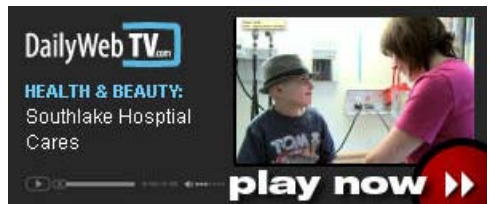


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One of Carparelli's loyal customers recommended him as a sponsor for Imagine, which both in scale and spirit aims to recreate the original Woodstock. The organizing team includes Artie Kornfeld, who played an instrumental role organizing that epochal festival.

Offering a peaceful, earth-friendly message has been as important as the musical line up and auctioning off the custom guitars to benefit charities helping children was a perfect fit.

"When you get the greatest living artists ... it's great for us," Caparelli's marketing director Robert Taylor says, perhaps underplaying the idea the small Canadian company, with its 10 employees, could potentially find itself in the Guinness Book of World Records for the world's most expensive guitar.

Mr. Taylor was also a loyal customer who hooked up with Carparelli. He is lending his connections to the rock music and art worlds to concert organizers.

Meanwhile, two Carparelli guitars have already undergone a custom paint job

The first was painted by British artist Damien Hirst, whose bold works have set records in London's auction houses. Christie's has already valued it \$250,000, Mr. Taylor says, but that's expected to rise after he gets it signed by up to 20 famous musicians.

"We know it's going to go for a serious amount. Damien's never painted a guitar before," he says.

The proceeds are expected to benefit War Child.

Also complete is a guitar that will benefit Amnesty International, painted by American Jim Warren who has worked with Disney and seen his work grace Princess cruise ships.

Because the proceeds go to charity, such items can be attractive write-offs for large companies, further driving up the price, Mr. Taylor points out.

A hand-whittled, double-neck dubbed the Unity Guitar has been blessed by the Mohawk Traditional Council in the hopes it can be presented to Jimmy Page and in the further hopes he'll come and play it with his musical pals in Led Zeppelin.

Mr. Carparelli is struck silent for a moment when asked what he thought when he first saw the Hirst guitar.

"It's - wow - exciting to see my guitars painted by world class artists," he says.

It also opened his eyes to the charity potential and he is looking into doing something similar on a local level.

Positive word-of-mouth and the innovative use of Facebook has also helped the company grow and Mr. Carparelli has reached out to the community.

The company works with Toronto's police on "Music! not Mischief," a youth mentoring program that keeps kids out of trouble by putting instruments in their hands.

It ran for two years as a pilot in Toronto but is now sanctioned and expanding to 17 schools across the city. Once that's in motion, Mr. Carparelli hopes to bring the idea to York Regional Police as well.

While they have a custom shop that produces instruments of up to \$5,000, they also make guitars for as little as \$600.

Carparelli's S4 is its version of the classic Gibson Les Paul, favoured by everyone from Jimmy Page to Slash. Mr. Taylor says their instrument holds up well in comparison, with superior wood and upgraded features making it well worth the \$1,300 retail price.

The guitars are assembled in South Korea, but Mr. Carparelli takes pride in sourcing quality materials from all over the world.



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His company found a comfortable niche so he doesn't have to worry about competing with mainstays such as Fender and Gibson.

Instead, he has tried to build a family of customers by providing inexpensive guitars and quality service when they're starting out, with high-end models ready as their skills improve.

"I'm going through growing pains," Mr. Carparelli admits, saying the company sold about 5,000 instruments last year and is poised to roll out six new models for 2011.

Those growing pains could grow if the expected exposure comes from the planned charity auction.

The guitars will be displayed at galleries prior to the concert and then played on stage before the sale.

Details of the concert are expected to be released in the next couple of weeks, with up to 50 acts performing on multiple stages over two days.

Though it was delayed, after initial plans to take place in July, Mr. Taylor says the contracts with bands and the venue are signed and things are ready to roll.

"It's going to happen. It has to happen," he says.

Carparelli Guitars will have a seasonal blowout sale at the Barrie warehouse (61 King St., Unit 20) July 31.

For more on the company visit carparelliguitars.com and visit imagineconcert.com for more on the concert.

See the blessing of the Unity Guitar at www.youtube.com/watch?v=oLKgNvypkzY

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