

COVER SHEET

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Transcriber: Amanda Fickey, PhD, Independent Contractor
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Interviewee: Neil Kendrick
Interviewer: Jesse Wells
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Transcription Notes:

JW: Jesse Wells

NK: Neil Kendrick

SA: Sean Anderson

In some cases, words such as “um”, “uh”, “and”, “so” and “yeah” have been excluded.

Time notations have been included at approximately 2-minute intervals.

... Indicates pause, delay in conversation, or, weak transition/no transition in themes.

The following names of musical genres have been capitalized: Bluegrass.

Attempts were made to verify the names of all musicians and geographical locations referenced throughout this interview.

0:00

JW: Let's start with when and where were you born?

NK: I was born in Middletown, Ohio, on October 27th, 1956. My dad was working at that time for steel mills in Ohio and wanted to come back to farming. So in late 1958 he moved back to Kentucky, where I was raised here in Kentucky then from '58 on up.

JW: Have you always been here in Menifee County?

NK: Yes I have. I lived on campus when I was going to school, but basically was raised about two and a half miles from where I live right now. We've lived at this location, my wife and I, for about twenty-seven and a half years now.

JW: Can you describe some of your childhood and family background, and if any of that has a link to luthiery?

NK: Sure. Well, I was raised on a farm. My dad was one of those people who would not hire anything done that he could not do himself. He raised we kids the same way. So that developed this desire for hands-on on everything, you know, and to do things ourselves. My dad played guitar, so when I was about ten years old my dad bought an old cheap guitar for the kids to all play. It was one of those typical, western auto types of instruments back them with an action about a half inch high you know, and you had to get pretty tough fingers to even play it. The first thing he taught me was "Wildwood Flower" and "Jimmy Brown." So that started my interest in music, and I was the only one of we four kids that went ahead and pursued trying to play. I kept that interest on up and then later on I got other guitars when I got older. Actually, I still have that old guitar. I've got it put away. It's not in too good of shape, but it's just a keepsake.

JW: Did you ever find yourself working on the instruments that you had? Did that lead you to...?

2:11

NK: Yeah. Later on, on my own instruments, that's actually what started it. There really wasn't anybody very close to this area who could maintain instruments. Being a do-it-yourselfer, I wasn't about to hire somebody to do something that I couldn't do myself. Actually, what really got me interested in building instruments, I was at IBMA one year when it was at Owensboro, talking with a Martin representative that was down there at that time, actually it was Bob Fare who does a lot of shows for Martin, and we were talking about backgrounds and he had a similar background to mine actually, and he said, "You know, if you wanted to build a guitar we offer a kit." So, in 1993 I came back home and ordered a kit from Martin guitars and my first instrument was a kit. Of course, there is a lot completed already. There are a lot of things you don't have to do on a kit. I put the kit together and it turned out real well and just from pressure from groups in the area and people that I was associated with and playing music with asked me, "Neil, Could you do this to my guitar?" It was kind of a snowball effect thing, you know, you get started doing that...

Then in '94 I decided well, you know, I think I want to do this at least as a hobby. Then I ordered materials and I decided I didn't want to do them as a kit. I didn't want to be one of those people that says I built something and it's not really totally built. Then I started learning how to do it from scratch.

3:42

JW: Did you have anybody mentoring you, or did you attend any schools for luthiery?

NK: I didn't really attend any schools. I did subscribe to the Guild of American Luthiers because they had a monthly publication that had a lot of how to things about luthiery. So I studied those journals. Then started searching on the Internet quite a lot. Talk to Homer Ledford quite a lot, and Homer was a real kind gentleman that would share his secrets. I think luthiers don't really have secrets. But Homer was really good about giving me some good pointers on how to finish and things like that you know, and precautions about how to prepare an instrument because it was really important about the preparation before finishing an instrument. I just asked a lot of questions. Research a lot and kind of self-taught myself.

JW: How much of your current approach is the result of exploration by you and how others have contributed to that knowledge in your craft?

NK: Probably all of my approach is a result of all of that coming together. There are influences all the way around that influences how you do things. I still do things much the slow way. I don't purchase inlay pre-cut or anything like that. I cut it all myself, and I do the wood from scratch. I have some samples laid out that you can see. If I profess to building the instrument, I want to totally build the instrument. It's not a custom built instrument if I'm purchasing things already done. Of course, hardware, I don't build the tuning machines, I purchase those, and I buy fret wire in bulk, but all the woodworking and everything is completely hand done.

5:32

JW: Have you done any traveling outside of Kentucky for the study of your craft?

NK: Yeah, and in late 1994 I went to Martin guitars in Pennsylvania because I wanted to be a warranty person for Martin and they had approached me about the possibility of that since there was not a lot of people in the area. I went up and studied with their repair people for three days. I worked in the repair shop alongside them to learn their methodology. If I was going to do warranty for Martin I wanted to keep in the methods of what they did, which I considered an approved way of doing things on the instrument.

So I spent some time with that, and any time we'd go on vacation if I had a chance to go to other places and visit then I would. If there were luthiers in the area, or retail stores even that might have some custom instruments that I could look at. Yeah, I tried to explore every time, even went to Hawaii one time when I went in the rainforest I could see the Koa, the big Koa trees in the forest, I got to see what they looked like.

JW: Have you used Koa wood?

NK: Yes I have. I've used Koa. I even did one guitar for a gentleman name Matt Grondin, and we did Koa binding on his guitar. That was a little bit of rock and roll influence. Matt Grondin's mother at one time was married to Ronnie Van Zant with Leonard Skynard. He still has that guitar too. He is in New Orleans now. He has a studio down there.

JW: How has your work changed over time? Have you seen an evolution of your craft?

NK: Yes and no. Things like... I was finally able to obtain a big drum sander which makes it easier where I'd have to do a lot of things totally by hand before now with a drum sander I can join tops and backs together and put them through the sander and level them together and everything. That's helped accuracy and time wise on that.

The finishing materials have evolved quite a lot over time. Better quality of finishing materials. You end up changing brands sometimes. Maybe another brand, or you talk to other luthiers and they'll say, "Well ok, I think a McFadden type of lacquer works better than Behlen lacquer so you'll experiment and try that you know and do some different things.

8:09

JW: I know you do some set-up work and repair work in the area too. Has that influenced the building of guitars?

NK: Oh, certainly. When you look at things that have maybe gone wrong on an instrument, structurally you see some things you can look at how it was done and try to improve your methods on getting a better structural integrity of the instrument in that area.

JW: Can you tell us a little bit about your background in retail? You've had a shop here in Menifee County.

NK: We built a store in 1997, built a building for a store, and opened up a retail store, and it was a full line retail store. We did band instruments also, you know, we did rentals with band instruments. That went on for several years. We finally closed the store in 2004 after the economy got tough for the retail business. As a lot of chain stores had closed at that time, a lot of facilities then. Met a lot of really great players. Saw a lot of playing styles, and that influences the building too, seeing how people play and what they are looking for. That was a great experience. We value that time a lot, and got to do a lot of festivals during that time. We'd go to the festivals and vend with our wares. Got to meet a lot of players up close and personal and hear what they liked about instruments and what they didn't like.

JW: What is your approach to building instruments? I know that almost all of your instruments are custom built but you don't really have any certain models.

NK: I don't really have any certain models. If it's truly a custom built instrument, I feel like the new owner of the instrument needs to be the driving force of the design they want. Everybody that has approached me about building an instrument for them, unless they already knew exactly what they wanted, I'd recommend them to take their time and experience every instrument they can. Go to a music store, talk to other people, and keep notes on what they really like and what they want their instrument to be and then design it like that. That drives the design of the instrument as far as the wood that's in it, the color it ends up, the binding that's on it, any kind of appointments on it as far as inlay and things. Then, as far as the feel of that instrument for the customer, I usually ask them, if they have something that they have that they own, or even somebody else's that really feels good to them as far as neck shape and size, I ask them to bring it to me and I'll take dimensions off of it and take contours of

the neck and the dimensions and then I duplicate that on their new instrument so it feels right at the beginning. They don't have to get used to the instrument. It's just the way they want.

11:07

JW: What are some of the materials that you prefer to work with when building?

NK: My personal desires and sound, I like a Rosewood guitar because I like a lot of strength in the instrument. In particular, because of the materials that are available, I usually recommend East Indian Rosewood because you can still get master grade in it, and German Spruce for the tops. You can still get really good master quality in it and it's a real optimal tone wood for the tops.

If you can get ahold of it, if you can get some old Brazilian Rosewood and some Adirondack material for the tops that's been laid back for a long time, if you can get some good quarter sawn material that's great. Most of the woods that are available now, you can't build as good of a sounding instrument with what is currently available, Brazilian Rosewood and Adirondack, I try to stay away from that if the customer is serious about sound.

If a person does a lot of studio work; sometimes they'll come in going with a Mahogany guitar because of the balance of the instrument. But with my instruments I do try to strive for a well-balanced instrument. All the registers to where they can go to the studio or on stage and still fit the bill and do a good job for them.

JW: Are there any models for the ultimate guitar when you are building? Other instruments that you've seen?

NK: Yeah. The old pre-war Martins. Everybody loves those pre-war Martins, and most of my clientele are Bluegrass type players, and they desire that sound a lot. So, you know, I've studied them a lot and I've worked on quite a few pre-war D-28 series type Martin guitars, and I saved dimensions off of them to study to see how they were set-up and then I try to improve on that to make a better balance, but still have the strength like the old pre-wars did as far as the presence of the guitar and how they project to the audience. They are quite powerful guitars.

13:17

JW: Have you had any apprentices in your shop?

NK: I've had a couple of people. I had one boy who was from high school who would come here each day for his block of time and work and he built a guitar through that process and that was his, I'm not sure how they called that with the school, it was kind of an elective where they could choose what they wanted to do out in the community. So he chose to build a guitar and I worked with the school system and let him come and spend time and did him as an apprentice going through it. And I've had a couple other people that were just friends of mine that wanted a custom instrument that really couldn't afford to purchase one being built so they came in to the shop and I did them like an apprentice through the process of building their instruments. Then, of course, my son did a high school project of building an instrument and produced a really nice guitar.

JW: Who are some folks who play your guitars?

NK: In the Bluegrass arena probably the most notable person would be Josh Williams. Josh has got Guitar Player of the Year for two or three years with IBMA. Played with Rhonda Vincent for five or six years and his instrument has influenced several instruments where people have come to me after they've seen a DVD of Josh playing, or YouTube has one that's played a lot where he and a couple of other guys, Andy Falco and... I can't think of Chris' last name, but they played at Station Inn.

[Interview interrupted by telephone]

15:13

NK (cont.): As far as people who play my instruments would be Josh Williams who played with Rhonda Vincent for several years and has had one of my guitars since 2005. They produced a DVD with Rhonda and a lot of people have seen that DVD and they would frame around until they could frame around what was on the headstock and they would contact me, they would find me on the internet and contact me and talk to me about building them a guitar. Josh was also Guitar Player of the Year for a couple of years with IBMA, so he's given a lot of exposure to my instruments out there.

There are some other people like Scotty Sparks with "Lost and Found" plays one of my guitars. A group called, "The Rarely Heard" up in Athens, Ohio has a five-string acoustic bass. A left-handed dreadnought that I built for Jim Stack, and a right-handed dreadnought that I built for Alan Stack... I've got four or five instruments in Canada. Built one for a gentleman named Giles Plant was the magazine correspondent for *Bluegrass Canada* magazine, and I built a guitar for him, and they did an article about me there in Canada. Just this past year I built a couple of guitars, one of those went to Thunder Bay, Canada. The other went to Boulder, Colorado last year.

JW: That's great. I know you were part of the "Made to Be Played" exhibit that the Kentucky Historical Society hosted. What recognition have you garnered for your work over the years?

NK: Well, of course the "Made to Be Played." *Flat Picking* magazine down in Miller did an article about me, in *Flat Picking* guitar magazine. We have a magazine here in Kentucky called, *Kentucky Living* where the energy co-ops around the different areas, each one of those co-ops, which ours is Clark Energy in this area, have a *special* interest area that they can do in the magazine and they did an article about me. It was a four or five page article. Of course I mentioned that *Bluegrass Canada* has an article. I was on Channel 27's afternoon program once. Been on radio with Morehead station WMOR and also with WMST in Mount Sterling. Of course schools and things do recognition. And also I was inducted into the Stringed Instrument Makers Hall of Fame in Georgetown, Kentucky, in their museum there in Scott County, Georgetown museum.

17:51

JW: Can you describe any unusual techniques that you use in your building?

NK: I don't think there is anything unusual. It's just an engineering-type process. Maybe a little different than the norm... I'm an ex-tool dye engineering [uncertain of word used after 'tool'] type of person so I do my stuff with a lot of precession. I do my stuff to the thousandths of an inch when I do thicknesses of tops and backs and raised sizes and things like that and positioning of things. I try to be very accurate with that, maybe a little more accurate than the norm of the typically builder.

JW: That definitely shows you're into your craft. Do you belong to any luthier or music organizations in Kentucky or around the country?

NK: Not really, other than the museum at Scott County... Other than the Guild of American Luthiers, but that's about it as far as organizations. I don't know if we have anything really, a local organization in Kentucky for luthiers. That's a good idea.

JW: It is. It's a great idea.

NK: That's a great idea.

JW: Has being a part of your community been important to your development as a crafts person?

NK: Yes. As you well know, Kentucky is just really rich with people with craft-type talent and even in other artists there are things they do and techniques they do that even cross over into instrument building. We have a gentleman here in Menifee County, Donnie Brown, that's an extremely skilled craftsman in woodworking. Donnie has done a lot of carving and he's done some really outstanding work and has done a lot of shows across the nation actually with his work. And of course Berea... It's just full of craftsmen down there on lots of things. Of course with Berea College, I think that helps a lot down there. But Kentucky is so rich. My mother did a lot of sewing. There are lots of designs and artwork in so many different kinds of things, even in ladies of years passing it, doing patchwork quilts and things and designs, I think all of that plays a part from one craft to another.

20:36

JW: Has your family been supportive? I know they've been involved in your work. Your son has done some work with you.

NK: Yes, yes they have. My family has always been... Even my dad will ask me, "What can I do to help you? Is there something I can do? I've got some wood down here would you like to look at some Curly Maple that I found out on the farm? Do you want some of this to save and cure up? And they've been supportive.

Labor wise, my oldest son worked quite a lot and learned quite a lot with the craft. He hasn't pursued doing it, which he does have the ability to do that. My youngest son is in that transition time where he doesn't know what he wants to do so he hasn't really worked with the craft, but they've all been supportive. My wife has never been difficult about the hours that I spend with the craft because I do spend a lot of hours. It takes a lot of time to produce a good product.

JW: Are you involved in teaching or writing or other activities directly related to your craft?

NK: Not directly related other than working with the schools. What I had mentioned before about a student coming through. I have spoken to a couple of classes about things related to this craft and other professional pursuits of theirs as far as employability and things like that because I worked in education also for a while with training. Not really any journals or anything.

[Interruption by plane flying overhead outside]

23:40

JW: We've discussed your guitar building. What other instruments have you built?

NK: I've built mandolins and banjos. I mentioned the one five-string acoustic bass that I have built. I've never really gotten into violin family building. I really appreciate the craft, and it's a very difficult craft, it's just never really desired to pursue doing the violin. There are some good craftsmen in this area around here that are very accomplished at that, but I do really appreciate those instruments. I have several old ones myself that I've kept.

I haven't really gotten into any electric guitars, building the guitars. It really didn't seem like as much of a challenge. I really went toward the acoustic side on instruments.

JW: Do you have a preferred instrument that you like to build?

NK: Mostly guitars. I've done more guitars than anything. Mandolins are pretty fun to build. They are actually more difficult than a guitar to build, to me, because there is so much carving to a mandolin than just shaping and bending wood.

But I enjoy all of them. It's kind of nice to be able to switch from one type an instrument to another at times just to keep your mind fresh and to keep the interest up.

JW: How has technology influenced your craft? If it has...

NK: Technology has. Even in checking frequency of instruments you need to have... I've got a really good strobe tuner and many times I'll tap the instruments to see where I'm at frequency wise even when I have a top in a free state with just the braces on it and not attached to the sides yet I'll see where they tap tune at and record the value. In different instruments I've recorded values of instruments that seemed optimum on sound and record what I could find dimensionally and sound wise and then try to compare that later to other instruments and see that relationship of those. But technology has been able to give us documentation that we can use, that we can find those values.

And there's a lot of methodology in tap tuning guitars from way back, all the way from putting sand on the top of them to see how it dances and things like that. The electronics industry has changed a lot of things. There are tools out there to even see the thickness. You can see the finish on this from electronic instruments. I don't have them, they're quite expensive, but the technology is there.

JW: Do you use any type of computer-animated systems like COC routers, or do you do all that inlay work by hand?

NK: I do that inlay work by hand. If I had that equipment I have the ability because I can do COC programming with the engineering side, but I don't chose to do that. I prefer to do it by hand. I have a little router base that my dremel is mounted in with carbide cutters and I cut it out by hand.

JW: And you cut the pearl yourself too...

NK: I cut the pearl with a jewelers saw by hand.

JW: Is there anything else that you'd like to contribute?

26:45

NK: No, but when the program airs I would like to encourage other people to not let the craft die out. If people are hands-on do-it-yourselfer kinds of people and they think there is something they would like to do I would encourage them to learn luthiery. I think it's an exciting field for people if you are a hands-on crafts person of mindset. You need to exercise a lot of patience because it is a process where you need to be very patient, careful, and cautious and slow about what you are doing, very methodical to get everything as accurate as you can, but I would encourage people to do that, to learn a craft. It's something that will stick with you and with your ancestors for years to come.

[General conversation between JW and SA regarding questions. Unknown question asked, film cut].

28:06

NK: As far as what I really get out of building the instruments, it's really a big thrill and it's something that makes you almost short of breath when you can go somewhere and somebody's playing on stage, and playing the instruments that you had hands-on work with it, built for somebody, and then they can entertain people with that instrument, and you see the enthusiasm of a crowd and how they are just latched on to what that person is doing. It gives you a really good feeling that you had a hand in that entertainment and that enjoyment that those people get from that. And a few times I've been able to turn the TV on and see somebody playing one of my instruments on stage and it's just a great personal satisfaction that you had a finished accomplishment, something that you started out to do and you were able to really complete that to the final audience. That's a big thrill.

SA: Do you know when you've really made a good one? When you can just flip it on the top and hear something and you're like, "Yeah, I nailed that one."

NK: All of my instruments, the first time the strings go on the instrument is when I date the label. That's the birth of that instrument. I made a PowerPoint one time so people could look and see the process because I wanted people to be educated, and I labeled that PowerPoint "Birth of a Guitar." Because that's what it is. You're bringing the instrument all the way through conception to a finished product, and when you strum across that instrument the very first time, and you feel the personality of that instrument, that's when you really know... that puts a smile on your face. It's alive. You've gotten this all the way. And that's a really good feeling too, and that's usually me by myself here in the shop. There's never ever anybody around when I do that, when I put the first strings on and get the first sounds out of it.

JW: Do you have any moments before that with the tap tuning?

NK: Oh yeah. As you go through the process you feel for that instrument and you know when it's going really good, and it makes you really hungry to get it finished when you know it's really going really well. I've been fortunate, I haven't produced anything that I've felt was a dud, you know. I haven't had anything that I wanted to take out and put in a dumpster.

JW: You haven't burned anything...

NK: I haven't burned anything. No. I have had steps along the way that I wasn't satisfied with myself and I'd turn around and do it again. You know, if I had a brace that I didn't like or whatever after I made a brace and I saw a grain pattern I didn't like it ends up as kindling. I make a new one.

JW: Definitely a perfectionist.

NK: Sometimes that's a haunting thing. But yeah, pretty much a perfectionist. I was raised to be that way, and genetically my dad was that way and I think that my kids are that way.

JW: That's great.

SA: Well I guess we will cut right now...

31:20

JW: Can we get a good view of some pieces in the process?

NK: Ok. Well, I've laid some pieces of wood out so we could talk a little bit about that, where they start from on building an instrument.

This is an example for a top on a guitar [demonstrates with wood]. I'll purchase it rough and sawn out, where it's been re-sawn and I'll get some pieces... This is some Adirondack Spruce and I'm usually very careful about where I purchase my woods from. Moisture content is extremely important about the process in the wood, about where it's got a different stability. If you try to do something with domestic woods locally it's really difficult, even if it's been through a kiln at a lumber mill and kiln dried, it's still not stable enough and hasn't been dried in the right process, it is still very important to think about stability. This is an example of blanks for a top. Most guitar tops, just about all guitar tops, are joined in the center. It's book matched. The wood comes like this and is sewn in two. And then it's like a butterfly; it's turned over like this. This wood is thicker than it needs to be. I'll purchase it like this and then I work with sizing the wood, I'll bring it down pretty close to the finished thickness that I want and then I'll develop the edge of it where it joins together, glued together in a fixture that holds it flat and holds it tight. After it's joined in the center then I can take it through the drum sander and take it on down closer to the thickness that I want. Then I can start the process of laying out all the positioning for the braces that go on the top. But it's really important, it's hard to see in its rough state, but it's really important that the grain be very straight and very well quarter sawn. If you look at the edge of it, you want the grain going straight up and down as much as possible. If it's any greater than four to five degrees I won't use it. It's not quarter sawn close enough for a top. But that's a really nice piece of wood, it doesn't look it in this rough state, but it will turn out really nice. That's Adirondack.

33:39

SA: Actually, could you pull that back and let me get close-ups of that wood?

NK: Ok.

SA: Will you just show me the edge there? Where you were showing me that the grain has to be...

NK: Well it has wax on it. This is going to be hard to see... You might be able to see, here on the edge of it **[pause for filming]**... You want that grain very much straight up and down, perpendicular to the surface here.

SA: Show me the surface. Hold it up just a little bit. There you go.

NK: And you can see the outlines drawn out where the guitar body would be able to fit on this. And this is Adirondack Spruce; it comes from the Adirondack mountain range up toward the New England states, up that way. That's the preferred wood, but it's very hard to get a quality piece like this now.

SA: Ok.

NK: Ok. And, an example of bracing material... Again, it's very important to have the bracing material have a good, straight grain. You can see this. It's real good and straight. You can see the lines in it here. You can see like a lot of wood it has a limit somewhere in it. We wouldn't be using the area where the knot is, but very selectively I would use a joiner and get an edge straight with the grain. Get it very parallel with the grain as it goes through, and you can cut off pieces to make the braces out of. So it's very important that the grain pattern is very straight in the brace, and again very quarter sawn where the grain is perpendicular. When it's mounted to the top, you'd want that grain perpendicular to the top to have good tone qualities and to be able to control it very well when you shape the brace and get it to vibrate well. Bracing in a guitar is all about the structural integrity of the guitar, but also taking, actually it's a process of weakening the braces to a certain point to where you still have good structural integrity but you have good vibration with the instrument. It has to have a lot of life to it and be able to vibrate a lot. You can make a guitar that's really strong and that you would be able to drive a truck on, but it would be a dead sound. It has to be to that point where it stays together but still vibrates really well.

This is a template sides. Guitar sides start out in a shape like this. This is just a guide. And then here are a couple of pieces of Brazilian Rosewood that I have shaped out from this template that would be ready to go in the bender. I use a fox-style bender to bend my wood. So these are book matched also just like the top and back would be, you book match the material where it's the same on both sides. But this one is ready to bend actually; it's in the right shape. It's got excessive length on it so you have an area that you would trim off.

36:53 (NK continues)

This is a guitar that's already in process and you can see the sides would be bent. You would have excess material here and excess material here would be trimmed off afterwards and before it goes in the mold to have the neck block and end block glued in the mold.

This is an example of a back set for a guitar back, and this is some pretty nice Brazilian Rosewood. This doesn't have the outline drawn out on it, but this is big enough for a dread knot and the shape would be like that of the guitar lying there in that. And it's book matched. It's sawn, and then you can lay it open like that. This has bees wax on it to keep it from cracking as it's stored. So you don't have any grain splitting with it. Like the top blanks, it would be sanded to get it close and then joined in the center. Typically on the back you'll have another strip of material of some sort for looks that goes in the back for decoration wise.

SA: Actually, hold that up too... Kind of fold it out, like you said it was... **[Pause for filming]** And now kind of fold it over.

NK: Ok.

JW: Which side would you want to use for that exterior?

NK: I would use the side that shows the print. This would be the inside of the guitar. This would be the outside of the guitar just for the drama of the looks of the wood much like the back of this guitar. This is some really nice Brazilian Rosewood. I like the spider lines. I think that looks really attractive in a guitar. This has a centerpiece... This is going to have inlay down the centerpiece down here. But Brazilian big enough is so hard to get it. I had to put this little piece of Maple in the center of this one just to get the sides out big enough that close.

JW: But nobody will ever know.

NK: Nobody will ever know. But it's still structurally very well, and this will be routed and inlay will be all the way down the strip on this one. Some Abalone Pearl will be in it.

And you can see the grain on top on this one if you look at the edge you see what I'm talking about, the quarter sawn of the grain has to be very close.

SA: Point it out to me.

NK: If you look on the edge you'll see how the grain goes up and down like that; that's desirable.

SA: Ok.

NK: This is a guitar neck in process. It's not shaped yet on contour, but it's ban sawed out as far as the shape of the blank pieces of wood. I have the fret board. I have the slots cut in the fret board and I have it mounted on. The veneers on the headstock are Brazilian. This will be shaped more, and then I'll go in and cut out the little routed out for the inlay. This will have inlay all the way around and down the edge and around the heel and around the top of the headstock as far as the pearl inlay, the Abalone pearl. But it will still be diamond shaped for the strength on the back of the headstock and so forth.

SA: Hold it up a second and let me pan...

JW: So you do that after the side binding? But the binding on first so that way you get a real good clean joint between it. It's a pretty slow process on the neck, to go in and cut that groove out of it, but I want to get the shape of it first because you run the risk of cutting through the inlay if you inlay it while it's heavy. The inlay is about a 1/16th of an inch thick. And so, when it goes in there you got, that curve has to come out of one edge of it. I usually put the contour in first, and then I go back and inlay it. I leave it just a little bit proud of the surface and then I can sand it down smooth and make it match up real well.

41:29

JW: Do you always use the truss rod?

NK: I prefer to use a two-way truss rod. Actually, Martin instruments have had truss rods in them way back from the 1800s always, but it was different material. They started out with a strip of Ebony to stiffen the necks. They've gone through versions of a t-rail shaped truss rod. They had just a square tube truss rod that was non-adjustable up through about 1985 and then they started adjustable truss rods. The adjustable truss rod they used then were just a one-way truss rod. You can just tighten it up to stiffen the neck. Most luthiers now use a two-way adjustable truss rod that you can actually bow the neck either way. You can bow it backwards or forward. So seasonal changes don't affect it as much with a two-way truss rod. Once you set it, it will hold there real well. With ones where you just stiffen the neck, you are subject to wintertime and summertime kinds of things. You may need to do fine adjustments to it to keep the neck in the right relief. You really don't want a fret board completely flat. You want it to have just a little bit of bow, to have a good action and to play well and not have any fret buzz.

SA: Do you have anything else?

JW: Was there anything else you wanted to show us?

NK: I've got a couple of instruments if you want.

SA: Sure.

[Video interruption]

43:14

NK: I had to make some changes to suit myself [holding guitar now on video]. So I do a little different neck angle and the body of mine is a quarter inch thicker than Lloyd Loars are built. The profile of the top and the back I made about an 1/8th of an inch taller for a plate because I wanted a little more depth in the body and I wanted a different angle across the bridge than what a Lloyd Loar is because I wanted a real good break angle right here so I could put pressure down on it so I would get more tone out of it. So my neck angle is just a little bit, laid back a little bit more than Lloyd Loar.

SA: When did you build that?

NK: I built this in 2006. And it was a prototype instrument, just so I could have something that people could play and it's curly Maple on the back. Color wise, I use an airbrush to get my colors real soft and to not have any sharp edge to the color change. So it's a real gentle blend from one color to another. That takes about four colors to do the back.

JW: How many mandolins have you built?

NK: I've built five mandolins.

JW: Have they all been F-styles?

NK: Yes, they've all been F-styles. I've averaged about two instruments per year. I don't build a lot of instruments. About two per year. So I've built thirty-six instruments since I've been doing this. I've got one mandolin in Germany. Actually, my wife and I worked with exchange students several years, of

having students live with us here at a time, and we had a girl here from Germany who had never ever heard Bluegrass music. While she was here we brought her to Morehead while they had the Music on the Streets over there. She got to hear that Bluegrass. Josh Williams was going to be playing with Rhonda Vincent in Winchester one time and they gave me a call and told me that if I wanted to come they could have front row seats for me. So I took her to that and she got to see up close and personal, getting to see people perform with it, and she fell in love with the mandolin. So she learned to play mandolin while she was here. I worked with her all year and she learned to play another mandolin than this one here. I worked with teaching her to play and she went back to Germany and tried to find an instrument that she could afford and couldn't find anything. Well I had already started a process because I knew what I was going to do and she keeps coming back to visit. The following Christmas after the year that she left she was going to come back for Christmas, so I built her a mandolin. Her natural father knew about it, he knew what I was doing, so we talked back and forth a whole lot because he was making sure that she didn't go and buy something. When she was here I gave her the mandolin for Christmas.

JW: Oh wow...

NK: And she still has it with her. Actually, it's in France right now. She went back and was going to university in Scotland and took it there for a while, and then she went to France for a year now with her studies and the mandolin has been with her. Everywhere she has gone she's taken it with her places there in Scotland and even while she was in France they were playing Bluegrass music. She'll go once a week to, there was a pub in Scotland that she would go to that would play Bluegrass music every Thursday night, so she would go listen to Bluegrass music. But that was a Bluegrass success story. Somebody who never ever even heard of Bluegrass music and now that's gone across the waters to another country.

JW: With your instrument...

NK: Yeah.

JW: That's amazing. Well, what do you play? What kind of different instruments do you play?

NK: Well, I wouldn't really call it playing. I try to play guitar and mandolin and violin a little bit and bass, electric and upright bass. But I'm not accomplished at any of them. I spend too much time working to be good at playing.

47:15

SA: Is there something else you wanted to...

JW: Do you have your guitar?

NK: It's behind you, over back there. Actually, in that case right there. **[Pause in filming]**. I'll stand-up with this; it will probably be easier...

This is one of my guitars that I built as a demo also. People always want to be able to play something and hear results of what you do. As they are all custom built there's never one hear waiting to try to sell. So I built this one...

SA: Oh sorry. [Interruption in filming]

47:52

NK: Ok. This is one of my guitars that I built as a demo for people to be able to play. My wife made me promise not to sell this although I've had lots of people trying to buy it because they like the sound of it pretty good. But I built this one as a demonstration of different construction methods to help resolve myths that people have about instruments. I built this one with a three-piece back, similar to what a D-35 Martin is although it doesn't sound like a D-35. People have a myth that they think D-35s have their deep gutsy sound because of a three-piece back which is not true at all. Martin started building D-35s because they had a lot of wood that wasn't big enough to make a two-piece back out of. So then was born the three-piece back to utilize the wood. So this one has a three-piece back. A D-35 has a lot lighter bracing in it than the other series of Martin guitars therefore they vibrate at a much lower frequency so it gives them a real deep gutsy sound. This one was built similar to what a Herringbone-28 people would be able to relate to. Same size bracing. Although the woods are different, it's the same on the top. But I did some things appointments-wise on this guitar to look different. I'd seen a Rosewood guitar one time with tortoise binding, so I did this one with tortoise binding. I thought it was pretty. Would look different. I put some little separator lines in it. And then, I did a different style of inlay in the fret board. Not real fancy, but not just round dots, just to give it a little bit of appearance. Then I put a Grevins-style pick guard on it. I thought that would look nice on it. Of course, this one I built just to suit myself on the size of the neck. And I have it set-up at kind of an average. This particular guitar had this bone nut in it, a bone saddle, but it also has bone pins to not suppress the sound. Plastic tends to suppress the sound of instruments so I went to materials that carry the sound on through to the top like it should. But anyway, this one is a little different. I made a little cut out to match the fret board and stuff like that to be a little different. This one was built in 1996 and it's been played a lot by a lot of artists.

SA: Let me get some close-ups on that. I'll get the bridge there...

JW: What kind of bridge plate material do you use?

NK: This one actually has Birds' Eye Maple bridge plate material in it.

JW: Birds' Eye Maple.

NK: Birds' Eye Maple. I like Maple bridge plates just because of the density of the wood, and they are fairly thin. Pretty small. I don't like a real big large bridge plate because it still pulls away from the sound I believe if you have too much mass in the bridge plate, but it's good hard material. So this particular one has Birds' Eye Maple in it. And this one has Adirondack bracing in it, with an angle in Spruce at the top. The outsides pieces and inside are East Indian Rosewood and Brazilian Rosewood for the center wedge on the back for the three-piece back.

SA: Will you show me the binding? Just lift the side... That's good.

51:15

NK: And now, this particular one has open back Waverly tuning machines on it, which I like very well. They are good smooth tuning machines.

JW: You've got to love that binding against the Rosewood.

NK: Gives it, I think, just a nice appearance. Martin actually did a series of guitar called a Grand Marquee Series, D-28, and they did tortoise with Rosewood, which was the only one I had seen that Martin had ever produced with Rosewood with tortoise binding. Some of the D-18s had tortoise.

JW: The D-18s...

SA: Can you flip it onto the back so I can see that piece?

NK: Ok. Of course, finish wise this one has lots of lacquer cracks and things like that where it's been exposed to all kinds of weather. It's been to a lot of festivals...

JW: I like that though...

NK: A lot of conditions. Yeah, I guess it has some character now.

JW: Yeah. You don't see an old Martin without finish jackets.

NK: No. No. And I did a little Rosewood heel cap on this one too rather than plastic, and just little things, little appointments a little different.

SA: Ok.

JW: Do you want to play any?

NK: Not really.

JW: Nothin?

NK: You can play if you want to play.

JW: Do you want any sound clips?

SA: Oh, no, that's not necessary.

NK: Ok.

SA: Is that good?

JW: I would like to strum it once.

NK: You can sit over here, or wherever you want to.

JW: Is the banjo ready to go too?

NK: I don't have a banjo.

JW: Oh, ok.

NK: I had a banjo... Oh yeah, that's the broken headstock one down there. That part. I had a banjo once for a prototype and Gus Black in Morehead talked me out of it. Do you know, Gus?

JW: I don't know... Gus Black?

NK: Gus Black. Yeah, he's over around Morehead.

[JW demonstrates on guitar]

JW: That doesn't sound like a D-35 at all. It doesn't have that big boomy...

NK: You can see, on the treble side you still have volume.

JW: Yeah, it is very balanced. That's awesome.

SA: Let's check for room tone. You can just sit right there and I'll just get the sound of this room for thirty seconds. Just be quiet for thirty seconds.

Room tone check

55:21

Interview completed