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As told to Mira Kaplan, 2938 words.

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On being happy with what you're doing

Guitar maker and visual artist Cindy Hulej discusses running a business, the value of mentorship, and never being on autopilot.

What are you making?

I'm working on the neck of a "T" style guitar for one of my clients.

How long does it take?

If I was just working on one guitar, I could finish it within 5-7 days, but I work on a lot of guitars at once, maybe 5-10 at a time. Some of them are more complicated because of the wood burning. That's the thing about custom guitars, every single one I've built is different. Everything at Carmine Street Guitars is made from scratch. We hand make even the templates which cut all the basic outlines just like Leo Fender used to do. Those are tempered masonite. Everything's drawn on there and we shape, sand, and rasp them all.

There's a lot of sharp objects around, heavy duty tools.

I use things like a rasp that I have to sharpen. I'm not very good at sharpening. I should be sharpening more. We have to use razor blades and heavy machinery with these router bits. Part of it is nerve-wracking and the other part is that it feels really cool to be using these tools.

I've heard you mention playing with your father's toy wood burning kit from the '70s when you were a kid.

How did that develop into your signature wood burning technique and more broadly, playing with fire?

When I was a kid and first plugged my father's kit in...it's one of those shitty old kits, it wasn't as controllable as what I use now, more like a soldering iron. It didn't even get that hot, not like these pens—I'll show you how fast this one gets red. It goes to about 2000 degrees, cherry cherry red.

I loved burning the pen as deep as I could and watching the smoke. I have a heavy hand with how I draw. I almost carve into the wood with the hot tip. I could also put the tip halfway down, like how a lot of these models are carved. And the burner can be used lightly, too. It's taken years to find my technique, especially with the pine. If you're looking at the grain structure, it's soft/hard/soft/hard. Not like a very hard maple. Maple is easy to burn shadowing on a face or something. But if you're carving pine and touch one of the other parts, it can easily get really dark or not dark enough. You have to learn how to manipulate and work with the wood in a different way.

In the Carmine Street Guitars film, you were pulling nails out of reclaimed lumber and saving them.

[carmine street guitars builds with reclaimed lumber from the 'the bones of old New York City']

[laughs] We save probably a little too much sometimes. [walks over to a table with huge jars of nails]. These are some of them. And here's some more of them. Every single one of these [nails] is hand pulled out of the wood.

Why do you keep them?

A long time ago, before I started here, Rick had come across this guy who said "If you save those nails, I can melt them down and make something out of them." So Rick started saving them and then he never saw the guy. It's funny because me and Rick had talked about doing pickups with the nails as pole pieces but we

just kind of forgot.

Then our buddy, Smitty with MJS pickups, messaged Rick, "Hey, I got an idea" and Rick told me one morning, "I think Smitty wants to do the nails as pole picks." Smitty cut them and used the nails right in the pickup, so the actual head of the nail, the square part of the nail on top is the pole piece that picks up the vibrations from the string of the magnets. It felt like this was happening exactly how it should when it should. Now we have custom pickups that have the Chelsea Hotel wood on the face. We use reclaimed wood from McSorleys, Chelsea Hotel, Chumley's...

How would you feel if a guitarist gets a custom from you and on stage they smash it?

It's one thing if it was just some factory thing. But if you got a handmade instrument...that's why we do it, because it's a tool for making music not for...but you know what? I don't know. I had a hard time letting any of the first ones go. And sometimes I still do.

I was going to ask you about attachment.

It's kind of the same thing. Do you want to be making a living at this or not? And if you sell it, it's not yours anymore. People can do whatever they want with it. I would say if they really wanted to smash it, as long as they order another one! I don't know, I wouldn't really like watching that too much.

Do you still think about guitars you've sold in the past?

I miss all of them. But many will come back and say hi at some point, or I'll get pictures. I wish that I had my first moto guitar, but I'm also really happy the person who has it has it. I think back to being in the moment, I was just starting out, I needed to make money. I did what I had to do and it's with somebody that really wanted it.

There's also a self-selecting customer, people who care deeply about their instruments.

Yeah, if you're going to get a custom guitar, it's usually going to mean something to the person. Especially the ones with artwork, even if it's a little logo or a date on the back of a headstock, or something engraved. You don't really find people that won't appreciate it.

Tell me the story of walking in here 10 years ago. You showed up one day and have been here since.

You know, people will apply to places, they'll send a bullshit resume and see what happens. For me, it's like, do it the right way, be presentable. If you were to die tomorrow, or tonight or in the next hour, would you be happy with what you've been doing? That's how I look at everything that I do.

I was like, "You know what? I'm gonna get my shit together and walk there with an actual resume and talk to the guy," not expecting him to hire me. I was on pretty good unemployment at the time. I wasn't expecting to get paid. I just wanted to learn.

I had just moved to Flatbush and wasn't used to the train schedule yet. It was the hottest day of the summer. I got off a stop away, on Broadway and Lafayette, and had to stop in a doorway to cool down. I had on my black suede creepers, my blue jeans, a white long-sleeve button up shirt, trying to look proper, with the resume in the folder. It's hilarious thinking about walking in here like that.

I opened the door and saw the bum squad guys who hang out all day. They watch Rick work, that's how we started calling them the bum squad. They're good friends. We're like family.

One guy Ron was sitting up front. When I walked in Ron was eating food at the counter, looking at me. I just looked around for five minutes. Then Rick came, "Can I help you with something?" And I said "well, maybe."

Have you always been able to go after what you want?

The one thing my grandfather always told me was to never keep a job you didn't like. If you're going to change something, just be smart about it. But you can't have a career that you're going to hate or be unhappy with.

What did he do for work?

He was a stone setter here in the city and so was his father. He built buildings like seven World Trade and worked with granite. My grandfather is from Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. I grew up in Jersey with him, he's like a second dad. My dad and him were steady in my life at different times, I had both of them. I didn't grow up with money, so I've watched people work my whole life and I watched things getting done all the time. Even my grandfather, just working on the house doing tile work. I was always very hands on.

So many people would never think they could work with their hands.

Yeah! A typical thing, is when people go, "I can't draw a stick figure." It's all about your hours, it's all about putting hours into something, "Did you put your 10,000 hours into it?"

When people call themselves a master of something...there's this thing with the old builders in Spain, where you could not call yourself a master until you were dead and then it's your peers that get to call you a master. So people that I see who call themselves masters in anything, I have that outlook too. I'm like, "Stop, get off your high horse. Just keep learning." It's all about wanting to learn for me.

Tell me about learning to build your first guitars?

When I started, Rick approached this whole thing in a way of... "Okay, well, you want to learn, we're gonna build a guitar together." That's the first thing. So we built this mini Telecaster type guitar.

You had never done it before, was that scary?

Well, no, because Rick cut out most of the wood and was just showing me at first, like a watch and learn thing for the first couple guitars. And then, "Okay, come here cut some of this." He'd be there, so I was learning hands-on but he was really watching like, "I don't want this girl to get hurt on anything, I don't know her. I don't know how she works yet." He had to have a lot of trust in me.

Rick sells his Kelly guitars, and you sell your Cindy guitars. Two businesses under one Carmine Street roof. How did that come to be?

Rick was kind of smart and also stubborn. He's taught at the Smithsonian, but never had an apprentice like me. I think that he had enough time to think about it and knew, "Alright, if I ever have somebody working with me, I'm gonna do it this way."

He's going to be his own thing forever. He has that legacy going. And now I have my own legacy. I think he thought about all that. I've never even had that conversation with him.

When we started out he said, "You know, if somebody gets a Kelly guitar, they're getting a Kelly guitar." And he started saying, "What are you going to name yours?" I remember going over the name for a month asking people "What do I name it?" At one point I came up with Stella something, "STELLAAAA!!!" I laugh at that now because I didn't even think of that. There's already Stella guitars.

He kept going, "Why don't you just do 'Cindy'?" I thought, people already name their guitars girl names. Why would they want Cindy, that's another girl name. I overthink naturally. And Hulej is just weird. Nobody's going to know how to pronounce it. Nobody's going to know how to spell it. Everyone kept saying "Go with Cindy." I thought, this sounds weird! But I ended up calling them Cindy's. And eventually I got used to it.

You've made hundreds of guitars since. You're working on one as we speak. Do you ever go into autopilot mode?

You can't do anything automatic because they're custom, each a little different. There are certain aspects that are the same, maybe the neck shape and thickness, but you can screw it up really easily when you work with a pin router or bandsaw.

Sometimes I forget something or do the wrong step and have to go back. I get excited, I'll paint the whole neck and put finish on but didn't drill something that I was supposed to. So I always have to pay attention and keep learning through mistakes.

Is there fear involved?

The only fear that I really have is working with some of the tools. You can get hurt very easily.

I thought you would have more wounds or scars.

I get splinters a lot. My hands are pretty rough, but my hands have always been like that since I've always been a worker.

If you're starting to feel out of focus or foggy, are you someone who can take a break or will you push through?

I've gotten to the point where if I route two or three bodies or two bodies and a neck, by the time I'm doing that neck, I'm shaking a little bit. It's a lot of continuous muscle work. If I'm not working out or using the router every day...sometimes it will be every 2-3 weeks, I'll have to stop and say "Hey, Rick, can you finish this one for me." It's a lot of physical work.

When you're off work hours, are you mentally off?

No. no. no. I try to be, but I'm always thinking. When you don't come from money and you gotta keep working to survive, especially when you have your own shop like this, you're always thinking "I need to answer emails, I gotta do social media, I have to run to the friggin hardware store tomorrow, order parts, talk to this guy." And the interruptions when somebody comes in and wants to see a pedal that they're not going to buy. It's good but it's just me and Rick here.

When I called the shop and asked for you, I was surprised that you answered, "This is Cindy."

I do everything myself, from the emails to the physical work. Whether it's talking about the order, or making it, whatever it is, customers that order something will realize, okay, they're busy. But some people, you have to be like, "Listen...you gotta be patient. I deal with a lot of people, I got a lot of orders. We got people coming in, we got life to deal with, I got two cats and a turtle at home."

You run the social media for Carmine Street Guitars and Cindy's Guitars. There are a lot of photos of the guitars and you on there. You seem very comfortable with a camera.

I've learned to do a lot of self portraiture. I work very closely with my friend Sarah, who I'm comfortable with, but with photos, I'm like a deer in headlights for the most part. I know Sarah's work well enough so I can almost picture what she's going to be doing visually. If I have somebody whose work I don't know and can't visually see it in my head, I'm like "Oh my god oh my god."

I like to know in my head how it will look and to be able to get a sense of things before it happens. If I have something in my head and it comes out different... I actually destroyed one of these pieces I was working on because of that. I routed the face down and started this collage on it. It's crazy because I have photos of it that I found years later. I remember coming across it on my phone and thought, "Oh man that thing looks so good!" I don't even remember what was pissing me off. I remember going over to this bench just ripping all of this stuff off. I was pissed. Having a nervous breakdown over it. I look back and I have to redo it now because it was cool looking!

But you couldn't see that because you were so in it?

It was different from what I had in my head. But I wasn't seeing that it was great in a different way. I'm constantly reconfiguring how my brain naturally works on things. You got to take a step back, realize, okay, maybe this isn't what you're picturing, but that doesn't mean it's not good.

My first mentor, who I'm still in touch with, is my high school art teacher, Roman. He would always yell at me about trying to throw things out: "Don't start destroying things. Just put it away. It might give you inspiration later, even if you still hate it. Or it'll give you a different perspective, a new idea."

The other thing was when he said, "Think about what you really hate, some kind of object. What are you just not interested in?" There was a scrunched up monster energy can lying around in the classroom. "I'm not into that thing at all," I said. And he told me, "Okay, you're gonna paint it." I thought, "Fuck!" But once in a while, you should just paint or draw something that you don't like and have no interest in to give you a different perspective.

Cindy Hulej Recommends:

Fashion: Katie Marie Gallagher (she is one of my best friends who passed away recently. She and her work have been an important part of my life for many years now.)

Book: Unmentionable: The Victorian Lady's Guide to Sex, Marriage, and Manners

Film: Only Lovers Left Alive by Jim Jarmusch

Music: Rowland S Howard

Photography Documentary: What Remains: The Life and Work of Sally Mann by Steven Canto

Name

Cindy Hulej

Vocation

luthier and visual artist

Fact

Cindy Hulej

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