



Getting To First Bass: Sheldon Dingwall

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On October 18, 1996, a fire engulfed the shop of Dingwall Designer guitars in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada.

Instruments, tools, wood, hardware, office equipment, and all of the

company's business records were destroyed--"right down to the last pencil."

Peering into the smoldering ruins, Sheldon Dingwall realized he had a choice: He could try to rebuild, or he could use the insurance money to pay off his debts and step away from the musical-instrument business. Five years later, Dingwall is happily producing basses again in a new shop equipped with the latest computer-aided technology. And his strongest seller is a new model appropriately named the Afterburner.

Like many of his fellow luthiers, Dingwall started out as a player. His first instrument was a ukulele (which has four strings, of course), followed by piano, drums, and guitar. By the time he was a high-school student in Saskatoon, he was teaching both drums and guitar. After graduation, Sheldon went on the road as a guitarist--and a budding instrument builder. "I had done my first guitar design in 1973, when I was 12," he recalls. "I guess it was something I always



wanted to do."

Dingwall hadn't even taken wood shop in school, although he had studied machining and built a Floyd Rose-style locking guitar bridge. Thanks to an amateur guitar-builder uncle, he learned enough about woodworking to begin making instrument parts. " I was growing tired of life on the road, and I had built a couple of guitar necks I'd scalloped on my hotel bed--a real mess, with ebony dust all over the place. My plan was to leave the road and build scalloped replacement necks, and that's what I did. The necks led to bodies, which led to assembling the parts, which led to complete guitars. As I was doing that, I got drawn into the repair business. That's college for guitar builders--it allows you to see every mistake that comes along and figure out a way of correcting it. At one point, I had a team of people working with me and we were getting guitars from all over Canada. During my repair career, five or six thousand guitars went through my shop. I was trying to build at the same time. Eventually the guitars led to basses. I'd sell a guitar and then get a call from the guy's bass player, asking if I could build him a 5-string."

Dingwall plunged into the bass business in 1992. he began--oddly enough--at the piano. "If you sit with your bass at a piano and compare the tone of the strings, it's pretty wild." Dingwall tried to figure out how to replicate the strong, clear tone of a grand piano's bass strings. "Then I opened up a *Guitar Player* magazine and saw a Klein guitar with the fanned-fret system invented by Ralph Novak. That just blew my mind--it was a 'eureka' moment. Within a month, I saw Ralph at a convention. I walked up to him and said, 'Boy, that sure would work well on basses.' He said, 'Well I wouldn't mind if you took a crack at it.' After that I went back and started on the design of the Voodoo."

Dingwall soon discovered that building a fanned-fret 5-string wasn't going to be easy. "I determined the scale length by installing a .130 B string, putting a



sliding nut on a Fender headstock, moving it back and forth, and retuning until I had the tone I was looking for. When I measured, it was 37". I had found that string in a box at a music store, with no package, so I had no idea what brand it was. I never even considered that it might be some crazy sting I'd never be able to find again."

That almost turned out to be true. Several major string manufacturers told Sheldon they couldn't make what he needed. Eventually, though, Kaman finally agreed to supply 5-string sets ranging from a 34" G to a 37" B. The rest of Dingwall's design came through trial and error, observation, and research.

Sheldon unveiled his new 5-string at the 1993 NAMM show. The first Voodoo had a red sassafras body, a three-piece maple neck with a pau ferro fingerboard, and Bartolini pickups. Although some bassists found the fanned-fret neck scary, many were won over by the instrument's commanding sound. (In BP's January '97 Ultimate 5-String Shootout, one tester described the Dingwall's B string as sounding like "the voice of God.")

Fanned-fret extended-range basses have been Dingwall's claim to fame ever since, although he did briefly try to build instruments with conventional frets. ("My heart just wasn't into it," he says.) and even after five years, he's still recovering financially from the fire that almost put him out of business. "If I had known how much effort it was going to take, I probably wouldn't have done it. But there's nothing else that uses my skills to the same degree, so I'm glad I did it."