



One of Kurt Schoen's customers holds a handmade guitar constructed from recycled wood.

# Guitar Hero

## UPS Pilot Assists Katrina Victims

By Karen Courington

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, many Americans combined talents and resources to aid victims in the Gulf Coast region. Kurt Schoen, a UPS pilot with an entrepreneurial spirit and a gift for constructing handmade guitars from recycled wood, envisioned the Broken Levee Guitar Project, which benefits

residents of New Orleans's Lower Ninth Ward. With some of the unique and storied wood from the neighborhood's homes, Schoen will construct guitars with the intention of using proceeds from the instrument's sale to construct a small neighborhood music school.

Actor Brad Pitt's "Make it Right" campaign to sponsor new home development in New Orleans inspired the Project. "The more I learned, the more I realized the deep extent of the damage in the Lower Ninth Ward," recalls Schoen. "While I didn't have the money to sponsor one of the Pitt homes, I wanted to help, and creating funds by using some of the former homes' wood to make guitars seemed like a good idea."

In collaboration with Mercy Corps, a non-profit corporation led by Rick Denhart, Schoen visited the Lower Ninth Ward in 2007 and recovered wood that

was treated, processed and shipped to his home in Walla Walla, Washington. Some of the historic wood once even served as barges, transporting industrial goods on the Mississippi River in the late 1800s. From barges to homes to custom guitars, the Broken Levee wood continues to serve a distinctive purpose, and keeps the musical spirit of New Orleans alive in a new way. In 2008, Schoen has planned a series of benefit concerts to showcase the Broken Levee guitars, using the proceeds for a neighborhood music education center.

The son of an accountant and a career Army officer, Schoen began his business ventures early, recording profits while managing his childhood lemonade stand and printing home-made silkscreen t-shirts after high school. While an aeronautical engineering student at the University of Arizona, Schoen landed an internship with Learjet, fostering his interest in aviation.



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After graduating from the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA) in 1989, Schoen flew C-141s and C-17s before transitioning to the Air Force Reserve and working at UPS, where he is a first officer in both the 757 and 767.

Throughout his 20 years experience and 7,000 flight hours, Schoen has developed multiple businesses. While a flight instructor at USAFA in 1994, he established the Palmer Lake Brewing Company, ultimately winning a gold medal in 1996 for their Sundance Hefeweizen brew. The remnants of the brewery still exist as The Warehouse wine bar and restaurant in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Much like past ventures, Schoen never expected his guitar-making craft to become more than a hobby.

Schoen's wife of 14 years, Sallie, played the guitar and inspired their daughters' interest in learning to play. An engineer with a childlike curiosity of how things work, Schoen suggested to his family that they build their own guitar, constructing a rudimentary cigar box guitar with toothpick frets. Fellow crewmembers commented on its fantastic sound, encouraging Schoen to enhance the guitar with the addition of an aluminum cone resonator. He successfully amplified the sound and created his first "Turbo Diddley" guitar. That guitar was given to blues artist Keb' Mo in 2004, and it started a roll of instrument orders.

Since then, Schoen has incorporated similar resonator cones in violins, violas, mandolins, mandolas and bass guitars. "I make these instruments not only to be visually appealing," says Schoen, "but to have a unique sound." An unassuming businessman, Schoen reveals that a variety of well-known musicians have performed with or purchased a Schoen Guitar, including Chris Robinson of The Black Crowes, violinist Andrea Zonn, Craig Ross, legendary drummer Steve Gadd, John Avila of Oingo Boingo, Billy Gibbons and Dusty Hill of ZZ Top, and Timothy B. Schmidt of The Eagles.

Guitarists Mikael Larsen and Rollie Tussing performed with Schoen's instruments during Dobrofest 2005 and 2006. "It's encouraging as an instrument maker to see the instruments used in unique ways by the various artists," says Schoen.

Requests for Schoen's handiwork continue to pour in, but he balances the orders with his flight schedule and the intensive construction process involved. He typically devotes 40 to 80 hours of work on each custom-built instrument, although, he says, "I've come up with a way to use tools and fixtures like I learned at Learjet to make the process more efficient."

When asked if he considers himself a musician, pilot, businessman or artist, Schoen responds, "Pilots are able to do what we do with focus. In the cockpit, there's no room to think about anything other than the task at hand. Delivering our people and packages safely demand that level of attention. But personally, I need a creative outlet, and the guitars are that source of self-expression." With a supportive family and the passion to help others, Schoen's Broken Levee Guitar Project will certainly make a difference, one guitar at a time. ➔

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