

This interview was in August of 2024. The interviewee, John Currier (JC), was a local luthier for many years. The interviewee is Lisa Pett (LP). The entire interview is 35 minutes, 47 seconds long. Some transcript portions were removed at the interviewee's request.

LP (00:01): Okay, so I'm starting recording. So first of all, you are John Currier, and spell your first and last name.

JC (00:09): It's John, J-O-H-N, Currier. C-U-R-R-I-E-R.

LP (00:14): Okay. And you are, or used to be, by trade?

JC (00:18): A luthier.

Transcription note: time (00:20) through (01:57) were cut from this interview transcript.

LP (01:58): Your story struck me as something very particular for a number of reasons, not just because I know you personally, and I know you're hilarious, and you're gregarious, and funny, and I know you're a performer. I know you are a musician, and you sing and play.

JC (02:19): How could you possibly know that?

LP (02:22): Right? I know that you made guitars.

JC (02:24): Yes.

LP (02:25): Which is a very specialized craft. You were a skilled craftsman. Now, I know you had a life before all of that, and I want to know more of why, when, and why you became a luthier. How you ended up here. And I especially, I think your story is a little poignant as well, because a guitar craftsman who develops an allergy to wood?

JC (02:59): Yeah.

LP (03:00): And has to stop doing something that they love? That's ironic in a, almost, it's a poignant kind of thing, because you were good at what you do and I think that, I think that is something that would strike a chord with people.

JC (03:20): Okay.

LP (03:21): I know that's a lot, but. Yeah.

JC (03:23): Well, as far as the allergy is concerned, if I look, I can probably find a photo of me where I look like a radish because of this allergy. There were other factors that made me transition out of that.

LP (03:45): That was a big one, though.

JC (03:47): It was, yeah, that was a big one, because, sadly, the allergies related to the major tone woods that guitar players use or guitar builders use. Years ago, when I was in Marshfield, my then wife gave me a book for Christmas called something like, I think it was Build Your Own Acoustic Guitar. I read the thing cover to cover. And I'd been playing guitar since I was 14. And I read it cover to cover. When I was done, I closed it and I said

out loud to her, how do guitars ever get built? Because the tolerances were much smaller than I imagined it, and it was a much more complicated thing. So I bought a kit to build a guitar and built a guitar that I still have that's unplayable. And I've actually kind of cut it apart to some degree to use when I ended up really building guitars. But it kind of got in my blood at that point. I was like, "oh, this is interesting. This is fun. Now I know more about it". I ended up going to school at Gallup School of Luthery in Big Rapids, Michigan. And doing their master program, which was a six-months, eight-hours-a-day-weekends program.

LP (05:18): So that's a commitment. You made an actual time and monetary commitment to learning a craft.

JC (05:25): Yeah, I did.

Transcription note: time (05:27) to (05:53) were cut from the interview transcript.

JC (05:54): I thought, "well, if I've got to retrain, why don't I do something that I can't do?" I thought, "I'll just start my retirement job early". And so that's one of the reasons I went. Or, you know, that was an opportunity presented itself. Okay. And so I went. And it was a great experience. I was sort of dumb lucky, too, in that I was the oldest of my group. My personality type was quieter. And because of the layout of the shop up there where we worked, the guy that was kind of the guru, Brian Gallup, had some people up front where he worked. He wanted the quietest people with him because he didn't want to be distracted all the time. And so we were up there.

LP (06:56): Can I ask what other kind of people were in the program? Age-wise?

JC (07:01): Well, let's put it this way. If you took the age of the second oldest person and added it to the age of the youngest person, it added up to me. So it was a pretty young crowd.

LP (07:19): I don't think people realize that in the music industry, there's a whole other industry propping up the music industry. There are artists and performers. There are musicians. But there are guitar techs. There are, there's just a, you know, we call them roadies or whatever, but they are essentially.

JC (07:40): It's a big industry. And it was, when I started, and this is now 13 years ago or thereabouts, there were only three schools really to go to. There's a whole bunch of them now because people figured out you could make some money doing it and that's not a bad thing. But at the time, there were really only sort of three in America, three reputable schools. And so I picked one, and their program actually lent itself to, there was a program for tech people, and then there was a program for, I don't know what you would call them, journeymen, looking to do something more. Then the master program, which was just the bigger investment of time and money. And it was, and it, my class was all male at the time, and it was a rolling enrollment. Every two months, new students would come in and some would leave. They had it designed in such a way that you could do six months and not repeat anything, but other people could come in and do their programs along the way. By the time I left, there were two women in the class, so it was changing. Some of the best boutique builders are women, which is nice. One of them actually was a resource to me when I was building my kit early on. She was in California, found her online, and I just asked her a question, and we're still in touch today.

LP (09:19): Okay, that's cool.

JC (09:20): Yeah, and it's a pretty generous field where people don't hold secrets or hide them. You know, they'll say, "I'm trying this. There's a feature on a guitar that".

LP (09:32): They're more collaborative.

JC (09:35): Yeah, everybody respects a craft, wants to make better guitars, wants people to share in that. So, I, I've never had anybody, and I've talked to some, you know, some of the premier guys that I, you know, in the field.

LP (09:52): Les Paul didn't not want other people making guitars.

JC (09:58): Right. We'll parse that later. Anyway, they were just, they were just amazingly generous with their time, and whenever you had a question or about something, they would walk you through things.

LP (10:13): I think anybody that enjoys and loves a craft wants to share that knowledge.

JC (10:19): Yeah, I suspect, I suspect.

LP (10:20): I don't know if you're making, whether it's, you're making cheese, or whether you're making, you know, the heavies.

JC (10:30): Yeah, crafts are, it's not a proprietary kind of thing to begin with. I mean, guitars are, you know, they've been around.

LP (10:38): Before that, they were lutes, which is why you're called a luthier.

JC (10:41): A luthier, that's right, that's right. And not a Lutheran.

LP (10:54): Okay, so you got a chance to pursue something you loved.

JC (11:00): Yeah.

LP (11:01): You made the investment, you went up and did it.

JC (11:02): The last assignment in school was to write a business plan and I had lived in the area, in Marshfield, lived in Plover for a year, actually, before I went to Big Rapids. Anyway, so I started putting a business plan together. I had a friend, and in part because of my age, I had some folks that were already retirement age or who had been in the world of business and had information. I got in touch with them, and I said, "can you walk me through how to put together a business plan?" So, they did. And because it was an assignment, I thought, well, I'll start with Stevens Point because I know the area, and the more I played with it and learned about the area, I realized that there's about a quarter million people in a 40-mile radius here. And there weren't any luthiers. So, I thought, this is good. Plus, I knew where the bank was and the dentist, and I thought, why don't we.

LP (12:15): You felt comfortable here.

JC (12:17): And I had some friends, yeah. Yeah. And I thought, well, why would I want to start somewhere new where there might be other luthiers? So, I landed here.

LP (12:27): It's a fairly portable industry, right? I mean, I don't know what your equipment entailed at the time, but okay.

JC (12:34): I threw it in a bit.

LP (12:34): Okay, good.

JC (12:35): I mean, it's sort of disassembled now. You'll see what's what. Maybe you'll find things you can use. So, did that answer your question about getting started?

LP (12:48): It did. It did. And how long did it take you once you decided to start your business? Was that your sole business? Did you work, and was it a side business?

JC (13:04): When I got out of school, out of luthier school, that was November. And I opened my shop. It was in Amherst where I opened it. I opened it in January.

LP (13:17): So, you had a shop, a physical shop.

JC (13:19): From November to January, I accumulated tools and materials and got started. And it was, you know, it takes a while to get up to speed. So, I was doing some repair work. I was trying to build guitars just so I could hone the craft. And I'm just trying to think. I'll show you some guitars later.

LP (13:48): Sure. And when was this?

JC (13:53): 2012, I think. I did it for about three years before I needed to get some other work to just help support me. And that turned out to be a good thing because it's a very solitary craft and my shop has no windows. It's all in the basement. I would spend hours and hours and hours alone in the basement. So, not only did I need the money, but I needed the social interaction. And it turned out to be a wonderful thing that I did, which was get a job working with you.

LP (14:38): So, you got a job at the library.

JC (14:40): That's right. Part-time job at the library. I did, yeah.

LP (14:42): Okay. And can you estimate how many guitars you've ever made in your life?

JC (14:52): Yeah. It's about 40 or thereabouts. It would vary from, I think, the most I made in a year. It was about a three to four month process for a guitar. And I would sometimes do more than one at a time. I think I did four in one year. Okay. I think that's all. The most I did in one year. Okay. But then, you know, kept doing it.

LP (15:25): And you were only doing acoustic guitars or were you doing solid body electric guitars?

JC (15:30): The only solid body guitar I made was in school. A project in school. So, no, it was all acoustic. I did arch tops, which are jazz guitars, you know, a little more. They don't have to be electric, but they tend to be. I've got guitars in, I think, eight states, which is nice.

LP (15:58): Have you ever sold a guitar to somebody famous?

JC (16:00): Well, semi-famous, yeah.

LP (16:03): Or infamous.

JC (16:04): There's a guy named Charlie Barnett who's in the Washington, D.C. area. He's written a bunch of music for PBS. He has a band called, I can't remember the name of it.

LP (16:18): We can always look it up. We'll Google.

JC (16:21): I actually have a little video I can show you of him. Which I, which I'm embarrassed in a way that I took, and I'll explain that when you see it. Because it's like six seconds long. And I, then I thought, I'm embarrassed by him watching me film him doing this. That kind of thing. But it worked out.

LP (16:44): Okay. So you, you repaired guitars as well. You made, you crafted guitars.

JC (16:55): Designed them, yeah.

LP (16:56): What does a custom design built acoustic guitar cost?

JC (17:02): Oh, it's going to vary hugely.

LP (17:04): What's a ballpark figure? What's an entry level?

JC (17:09): Entry, well, let's put it this way. If I build a, a, a custom guitar for somebody, without any bells or whistles. Straight head guitar. It's probably going to be in the neighborhood of \$3,000. Maybe a bit more. And that's, that's materials and basically minimum wage. Because it takes a lot of hours.

LP (17:35): What's the most expensive guitar you ever made?

JC (17:37): The most expensive one I sold was about \$6,500. When I was in school, the guy that taught me said, "you know what you have to do to sell a \$10,000 guitar?" I said, "no, what?" He said, "ask for it". But he said, "it better be worth it or you'll only do it once". So I would kind of, uh, every, every guitar I built, and it was very interesting. One of the watch words or, uh, maxims of the school was perfections for the next guitar.

LP (18:12): Oh yeah. That makes sense.

JC (18:15): Yeah. And every time I built a guitar, I was getting closer to really doing what I wanted to do with a guitar. Um, and of course you never get there. The value of the guitar went up based on all sorts of variations.

LP (18:35): Specs and materials.

JC (18:36): I mean, materials can vary considerably. Some people would want special inlays. Some people would want, you know, electronics. That kind of stuff. Special shapes. I built a couple special needs guitars, which were good projects. One was for a man who had lost a hand. He played left-handed and had a prosthesis that held a pick. A left-handed guitar is a little odd, and he, but he wanted a particular one.

LP (19:10): He can't do it just like Paul McCartney and just flip it.

JC (19:14): He just can't flip it over. No, the bracing's different than everything else. He needed a pick guard in a special place, because he kept hitting the prosthesis on it. So we did a couple things there. I built a guitar for a guy in a wheelchair who needed the guitar to fit his wheelchair. So it had like, you know, a different shape. And, you know, a couple actually. And one of his problems was that the hard edge of a guitar, which is kind of this 90 degree angle pretty much, could cut into his leg, and he wouldn't feel that it's cutting off the circulation.

So we actually carved a curve to fit his leg, and then we had a pad that we put on his leg so it wouldn't slide. And he's still playing that.

LP (19:59): Wow. So. Would you still be making guitars if you could?

JC (20:12): Probably not.

LP (20:14): So you were looking into kind of phasing that out?

JC (20:17): Well, I'd kind of met my goals. This might not be for your story, but my MO is I do something for about a decade and then I say, "okay, I got that. What's next?"

LP (20:31): And that's, I mean, that's personality wise. That's not a bad thing.

JC (20:35): No, I don't think so.

LP (20:43): Rather than doing something that becomes a chore or just a job, you know, if you want it to, you want to keep doing something you love. And of course, there are some people that just want to do that forever and that's what they do.

JC (20:51): Can I waste some of your time on, some of your bites on here?

LP (20:56): Yeah.

JC (20:57): You know, I was in the church.

LP (20:59): Right.

JC (21:01): And when I went to seminary.

LP (21:01): So you were a.

JC (21:03): Congregational minister.

LP (21:04): A congregational minister. Okay.

JC (21:06): When I made the decision to go to seminary, these people I knew, friends and acquaintances said, oh, you're going to be a minister. And I said, I don't know. I'm going to seminary. I was able to separate those things in my mind. I was going to learn something.

LP (21:34): FYI. So John Green, the author. John Green went to seminary school, and he did an internship at a children's hospital. That's why he never finished seminary. Why he never became a minister or. Because he did an internship.

JC (21:54): Because he said, how can God do this? Or because he.

LP (21:56): Yeah.

JC (21:58): It wasn't that "I found my calling".

LP (22:00): Right. Dealing with dying children in a hospital was too much for him. I won't say it was a loss of faith. I don't think he's ever lost faith. I've listened to him. But he said, "I can't do this. I can't tell people that this was God's plan".

JC (02:20): I'd like this guy.

LP (22:22): I don't think that childhood cancer is really a good plan for God.

JC (22:25): No. I don't think so. You can weed me from that garden.

LP (22:30): Yeah. I thought that was really interesting. Because it would have been a huge loss to the literary world had he not.

JC (22:40): Oh yeah. Yeah.

Transcription note: time (22:41) to (22:59) were cut from the transcript.

JC (23:00): Well actually I was trying to write. That's when I wrote my book. I actually went full time as a writer. Just thinking, because I'd written like, a 300-word story that made me 500 bucks or something. Or no it was an 800 word story that made me 300 bucks. It was in a nice, respected magazine. And I thought, "oh well, if I can do this a few times a month I don't have to do it every day". So I spent two full years doing it full time. I wrote fiction, non-fiction, gags, greeting cards. Anything I could write to and submit. I mean I really did it full time, like a job. I didn't putz around with it. And I sold one story, two articles, and that was it. I finally said "I've got to help the family cause". So I went back to school and learned how to do computer programming.

LP (24:08): Okay. So then you were programming.

JC (24:09): And then I was programmed for nine years.

Transcription note: time (24:13) to (25:14) were cut from the transcript.

JC (25:15): That's when I went to luthier school.

LP (25:17): So you made guitars for 12 years.

JC (25:19): Yeah.

LP (25:20): So you made 40 something guitars.

JC (25:22): Yeah. When I wasn't building for a customer, I was building. Just building so I could try new things, or experiment with different finishes. Just keep the skills up.

LP (25:37): Okay. So, obviously, like any other thing in the world, mechanization has taken over. You can get cheap guitars.

JC (25:57): Oh yeah. The state of the arts.

LP (25:58): Factory built guitars. Or you can get expensive, well made factory quote unquote “guitars”. You can get cheap and easy starter guitars to learn to play. I mean, God knows, Willie Nelson's been playing the same guitar for 50 years.

JC (26:15): But it's had a lot of work done.

LP (26:22): Obviously. I don't think people realize how it's been refurbished here and there. Has the industry changed much?

JC (26:38): When I first started, I thought I was going to compete with the big boys. Then I realized very quickly, very quickly, that I was not a manufacturer. I was an artisan. It's a whole different animal there. Like the boutique guitar. Had I started 20 years earlier I might still be doing it. There are a gazillion boutique builders out there now. And there weren't. I mean when I started, seriously, there weren't. There was a guy named Larravee. I don't know Larravee's first name. French guy. I think he's still alive, but I'm not sure. From Canada. He had a school and built guitars. Linda Manser. Michael Greenfield. There's like a handful of folks that worked with him and became the first tier of boutique builders. And they're all wonderful. Do you know Bruce Coburn?

LP (27:53): Yes.

JC (27:54): Yeah. Linda Manser makes his guitars and they're just wonderful.

LP (28:00): I mean, there are certainly artists who want boutique. Who want handmade.

JC (28:06): There's a difference between manufactured guitars. The Martins. The Taylors. The Gibsons. Two things. One. The state of the art is such. It's a lot of computer generated pieces. They make it consistent and fast.

LP (28:26): I don't think people realize we have the ability now to design with a computer, cut pieces, and put pieces together. The differences are so small that they can keep it consistent. They can put out a very adequate, good quality product.

JC (28:53): But it's a little like Ford or Chevrolet. You're going to get a lemon now and then. And you're going to get the one that goes forever. But most of them are going to be kind of in the middle. And hooray for them. Because there are a lot of good guitars out there that are affordable. I'll just tell you about this guitar I built for a guy. He contacted me. And he said, “I want a guitar. I want you to build me a guitar”. That's where it started. And I said, “okay. What do you want? What kind of music do you play?” And he said, “well I'm kind of a blues player.” And so that tells me the kind of sound he might be looking for. He said “I have these two dogs that have gone on to their reward. But I loved them. And I kind of want to do something to honor them”. I said, “okay”. So he sent me a picture of his dogs. And I said, “okay. Well, based on the sound you want, that you've described to me, these woods will match the color of their coat”. And he said, “great, could I have an inlay that has the name of a dog here and then another inlay up here?” One of the inlays he designed, and it was going to be right where I put my logo. I almost said no. And I thought, “really? Do you want to lose this job?” So I thought about it. I thought, “you know what I could do”. I found a way to get my logo on there without impinging on his inlay. And he wanted what's called a sound port. It's like an acoustic monitor. It's a hole in the side of the guitar that does a couple things. It lets the guitar player hear what's happening, but it also adds bass, for some reason that I'm not sure anybody really fully understands. He wanted his in the shape of the dog's paw print. So we did all that. But a manufacturer wouldn't have done that.

LP (31:16): Wouldn't have been worth it for their time.

JC (31:18): Oh. Not at all. So anyway. The guy, he actually did a CD. And he put the guitar on the cover of the CD. Which is kind of nice.

LP (31:33): Is there anything you can add? Anything about making guitars, or playing guitars. Or, well, guitars.

JC (31:43): In terms of building a guitar. Often guitar players select a guitar the reverse way that I would build a guitar. They come into a store and they see a wall of guitars. They say "that one's pretty". And that's the one they grab. And then they say, "that feels good in my hand". And then they strum it. And they go, "oh I like the sound of that". And then they buy the guitar. What I do is, I start with the sound and then I want to make sure it's playable. The cosmetics are the last thing.

LP (32:22): Do you think that you approach it differently because as a luthier? You're more worried about the sound being correct, whereas a performer worries about how cool they look on stage?

JC (32:31): Well, it's probably an apples and oranges kind of deal. My guitars are probably not great. In certain circumstances they're probably good stage guitars. But I think they're probably better studio guitars. Because one of the things that a manufacturer will overbuild is finish. And the heavier the finish the less robust the sound, typically. The lighter the finish the more likely you are to feel the changes of humidity and temperature. So if you're going from inside some arena that's air conditioned to an outdoor state fair you don't want to be playing my guitars.

LP (33:26): So that's a big difference and that explains why people need a bunch of guitars. Do you miss it?

JC (33:42): I don't. I don't miss it. I had a good ride. Like I said I met my goals. I achieved what I wanted to achieve. I learned a huge amount of stuff. I'm really pleased that people are still playing the guitars. Every now and then I'll get a message from somebody or a recording from somebody.

LP (34:03): Do you. I mean I saw you play, so does your allergy prevent you from playing?

JC (34:10): No. Once it has finish on it I'm protected from all that kind of stuff.

LP (34:15): Did you ask the doctor why you're allergic?

JC (34:17): I went to the doctor for, I don't know, a couple months probably, trying to figure out why I was getting these rashes. Because I was getting them all over my body. And of course you do the natural thing. "It's the soap you're using, it's dye, clothes or whatever. Your laundry detergent". All that stuff. So we went through all that stuff. And then one day I was in the shop and I put on my respirator, you know, and I realized that where the strap on the respirator was I had a pretty hot rash. And then I just put it together. The rosewoods and the mahogany's are the worst for me. Those are the big ones.

LP (34:55): Did the doctor say they'd ever heard of it? How often is it?

JC (35:00): They were kind of, I don't know, surprised is the right word. Maybe a little surprised.

LP (35:08): Do people develop allergies based on overexposure?

JC (35:13): I don't know. I don't know that. I know that some woods actually come with cancer warnings. I mean, there are some woods, especially exotic, like Central American exotic woods, they can be real dicey. You don't want to be breathing them.

LP (35:27): Interesting. So they're pretty but don't be sanding them down.

JC (35:33): Right. Or at least not without good protection. Do you want to see some stuff?

LP (35:41): Yeah. I want to see guitars. Let's go.