Stringed Things

Better lucky than good

The title of this blog is one of my favorite sayings. Oh, I don't want to minimize the value of skill, learning and hard work. However, sometimes you get a break and you know it wasn't totally due to your skill.

Such was the case as I did battle with a guitar project recently. The guitar was a half-homemade, half-factory guitar. I had built a Strat-stye body with a polar body and a flame maple drop top. That's not a standard combination, but that's the joy and fascination of home building – you see some unusual combinations. In my case, they're usually the result of using whatever I happened to have lying around.

Fortunately, I had bought a good Strat body template off of ebay. I used it to make a neck pocket template out of thick plywood. I also used the template to shape the body.

I had some help on the body from the construction trades teachers at the high school where I teach. They have a planer that can surface very wide pieces of wood. I needed some of the poplar taken off of the depth of the body so that, with the drop top, it would be about the correct depth.

The body came out all right, although a mishap with a router chipped off some of the drop top. That resulted in me re-shaping the body somewhat to remove the evidence of the damage. It still looks fairly "Stratty," but a sharp-eyed guitar fan will notice the difference.

I bought a GFS (guitarfetish.com) Strat neck for it. It had a paddle head, which I re-shaped to something that looked good to me and hopefully wasn't a copy of any other guitar.

Thanks to the good template and careful routing, the neck fit into the pocket very well. This, however, wasn't the lucky part. I attached the neck, strung it up and attempted a crude setup. I was disappointed to find that the action was higher than I wanted it to be. I figured that shimming the neck angle would be the solution, but I didn't have the patience for that at the time.

So, the guitar hung on my wall for awhile. Then, I came across the January 2015 edition of Vintage Guitar. It had an article on modifying a guitar to have a micro-tilt neck adjustment. This adjustment took the place of shimming the neck with small pieces of work. I immediately thought it might be the solution to the neck angle problem of the home-made Strat.

I bought the magazine, got the parts (there aren't many) and went after it. Fortunately, I have a small drill press, which is essential to doing this mod.

I made some mistakes while installing the mod. The fingerboard has a nice, small hole in it now, thanks to me carelessly not watching my drill depth. But, I installed the mod and it was functional. However, when I tried to reassemble the guitar, I ran into a problem: somewhere along the line, the nut had fallen out of the neck.

I also discovered another problem: I somehow had stripped out three of the four screw holes in the neck. This made it necessary to glue in one-eighth-inch dowel rods in the holes. Later, I would use a flush cut saw and a sander to make the neck mating surface smooth.

To replace the nut, I went to the local music shop to buy one. I had hoped they would have some cheap plastic ones, but all they had was a $13.50 high-grade nut. This was more than I wanted to spend. So, it was off to ebay to get some plastic guitar nuts from China.

Buying guitar parts from China has worked well for me in the past, and this case was no different. You're not buying the highest quality parts when you do this, and you have to wait a few days, or even weeks, to get your stuff. But the price is right and you don't get ripped off for shipping.

The package of nuts arrived. But when I tried to install a new nut, it was not going in level. It was rocking back and forth. I tried to smooth out the slot with a small carving tool I had, but it wasn't working.

Some research led me to a nearby Woodcraft store, where I bought a one-eighth-inch chisel. The chisel was just a tiny bit wide for the slot, but I used it anyway. It did a great job of cleaning out the slot In fact, I almost did too much. When I put the nut in the slot, it looked a little low.

I put couple of drips of cyanoacrylate glue in the slot and pressed the nut in. After a few seconds, I let it go. I had taken care of the screw hole problem by now and had drilled new holes into the neck.

After I re-installed the neck and strung it up, I expected to use the micro-tilt-neck adjustment to get it just right. Here's where it was better to be lucky than good: the action was great! The strings looked to be the right distance from from the fret and there was just a little bit of relief in the neck.

I played it and it played very well. Who knows what made it right? Could it have been re-doing the neck screw holes? Did I get lucky on the nut height?

Of course, there are a couple of related statements to "better lucky than good": luck is when preparation meets opportunity; and, the harder I work, the luckier I get.

The guitar plays well and sounds good. It won't be hanging on the wall so much now!