

Versoul Guitars

Innovative Finnish Guitar Design With A Golden Touch

Be sure to remember the name *Versoul*, because these are guitars that have already put Finland on the world map as a guitarbuilding nation. Mats Claesson and Peter Almqvist have tried the electric solid-body *Henry* and the acoustic *Buxom 6*. The builder himself, Kari Nieminen, also tells us about his extraordinary and original design.

By Mats Claesson and Peter Almqvist

Versoul – Henry model

As usual, when you have the opportunity to unpack goodies like these, you get soft knees. I had only seen pictures of this guitar before, so the expectations were high when I finally sat with the *Versoul* on my knees.

CONSTRUCTION

Kari Nieminen tells us that he likes to work with Finnish alder: “Finnish alder gives a very balanced attack and a vibrant, more alive tone than American alder. This might have to do with the environment that the tree grows in”, says Kari. “It’s also easier to get your hands on it here in Finland. It has nothing to do with Finnish patriotism. Another thing that is important to me, is the ecological issue. Many trees are becoming more and more rare and therefore also more expensive, like Brazilian rosewood and mahogany. The wood- and guitar industries are facing big changes. I have almost completely stopped making guitar necks of mahogany. I use Finnish aspen, which I think has a better resonance”

The body is Finnish alder with a white/black plastic binding. It has a Gotoh tuneomatic tailpiece and bridge.

The thick plastic tortoise shell pick guard has a round, simple design. The three way toggle and the neck pickup is attached to the pick guard. The bridge pickup is mounted directly on the body. Three pots, two volume and a master tone, are placed in a beautiful curve next to the pick guard. The neck is made of Finnish aspen and has a half-round shape that is neither too thick nor too thin, just perfectly shaped for maximum playing comfort. The fretboard is East-Indian rosewood and it has a 12” radius. The 22 frets are me-

dium and pretty low; Dunlop 6130. The frets are an important factor when it comes to the feel of an instrument and I tend to complain if they’re not flawless. The fret job on this guitar is great and it is a pure pleasure to press the strings and let them ring. Speaking of great polish and workmanship, the nut is made of moose shinbone. The nut really shines in a way only polished bone can do, and the strings run completely friction-free through the slots, to finally end up perfectly tuned in the Gotoh tuners - three on each side of the head. I think the shape of the head on a guitar is very important, especially in an aesthetic sense. Here Kari Nieminen delivers a smash of Bjorn Borg class. The head has a straight low-profiled and discrete shape with a thin veneer of cocobolo rosewood on top. This is already looking great, but Kari has added a dark and light laminate on top that gives a very distinctive, sort of Art Deco inspired expression. And to round it off, there’s a round dot of 23 carat gold leaf. No name, no logo, just a round, golden dot. How cool is that?

Gold leaf is part of Kari’s signature. The fret marks on the side of the neck are also made of gold leaf. These are nonchalantly torn pieces that look like brushstrokes.

The next smash hit is of Hulk-calibre. The whole top of the guitar is covered with 23 carat gold leaf. You can’t get any cooler than this!

Kari tells us that he has wanted to create a 3-dimensional look. With gold leaf you get a rough texture that reflects light and gives a very special kind of depth. It’s a hard process to apply the gold leaf.

PICKUPS

The pickups are his own design. You can choose between humbuckers or single-coils. Both models look the same. The reviewed guitar sports single-coils. Kari tells us about his pickups:

“I wanted to achieve a unique design, which isn’t very easy. The pickups have a cover of perforated metal which I bend and press myself. A friend of mine winds the pickups according to my specifications. After all, it is the sound that is most important, and in my single-coils I try to achieve a fat, balanced tone that responds very well. I’m not very fond of conventional humbuckers. They are sluggish and dull and get easily muddy in higher volumes. My humbuckers are a bit Rickenbacker-sounding, if you want



to make a comparison”

PLAYABILITY AND SOUND

It shouldn't come as a surprise when I tell you that the guitar plays extremely wonderfully and sounds fantastic. It's almost impossible to put it into words, when you play a few chords and realize what a guitar!

Some guitars speak to you immediately, and this guitar says; just play, don't think, just enjoy. This is one of those guitars! The intonation is perfect, and even if it comes with pretty heavy strings, .011 I think, it feels like moving your fingers through silky whipped hot chocolate. Low action with no fret buzz.

It's difficult to communicate how it feels to play this guitar because it's such a personal experience. Sound, on the other hand, is something that you can share with others and requires a more uncomplicated description in order to give the reader a good picture. Here we have the fatness from a humbucker, mixed with the crispness from a Telecaster. The middle position gives an extremely funky splashing tone. And it's a very resonant tone, that never gets muddy regardless of how your amp is set.

I don't want to say that this guitar is better suited for this or that. The Henry will do anything from soft and clean, to enormous distortion with flying papers.

VERDICT

So, what to say... A hand built guitar of the highest quality – from raw materials to design – with a sound that is capable of anything. It is also painfully easy to play. If you have some money and you are looking for “The Guitar”, Versoul Henry is definitely one to be considered. A timeless design, stunningly beautiful and this guitar will fit in anytime with big names that start with G and F.



Kari Nieminen, the founder and head of Versoul Guitars, has been building instruments for more than 20 years. He founded his own company Versoul Ltd in Helsinki, Finland in 1996. Kari's philosophy in building guitars is to maintain a great respect for traditions, while advancing the art.

He holds an MFA degree in industrial design and he has won a series of prizes for his original designs. One of his guitar models, the Zoel, has even been on a Finnish stamp! Kari says he's inspired by European modernism.

He makes steel and nylon string acoustic guitars, electric guitars, an electric baritone guitar, a twelve-string sitar with thirteen drones and a scalloped fret board, a resonator and electric bass guitars.

Versoul has two models of steel stringed acoustics: Buxom, which is a jumbo model and Zoel which is based on a classic Dreadnought. Both models are available as either 6- or 12-string versions.

The guitar models are divided in three categories:

1. Silver label – High Quality
2. Gold Label – Premium Quality
3. Platinum label – Supreme Quality

Kari builds his instruments in a humidity-controlled workshop. The production rate is about one instrument a week. Kari buys his pre-cut wood from the USA, Europe and South America. He uses classic tone woods like cedar, spruce, jacaranda, mahogany and maple.

Kari is using domestic variants because many of the previously mentioned woods are threatened with extinction.

In Finland, there's a lot of aspen, alder and basswood, which

gives a very good tone, especially when used in solid bodies and electric basses. Another domestic material that is being used, moose shinbone! This material is great for the nut and saddle, and it gets a remarkable shine when polished.

The design of the Versoul instruments is very special. Kari uses thin 23 carat gold leaf in the rosette and also as the top on his solid body model Henry. By using gold leaf, he manages to create a 3-dimensional look.

Another speciality is the fret marks on the side of the neck. They look like nonchalant brushstrokes, but give a very elegant look. It reminds you of the golden frames of old paintings.

Kari has developed a new head for his nylon-strung guitars, that will make it easier to change strings. The head has the shape of a frame, and there's more room for your fingers when you change strings.

His acoustics all have bolted necks as standard and he says that this makes it easier to adjust the neck and it also enhances the resonance from neck to body.

Another speciality is the lack of a heel on his acoustics. This gives easier access to the higher frets.

The pickups are also made here. They are handmade, and so are the pickup covers also handmade before they are chromed or gold-plated.

When choosing piezos, Kari prefers the Finnish B-band because it is the most natural sounding piezo around.

The reputation of Kari Nieminen has spread in the USA. Known Versoul-artists are Kenny Burrell, Larry Carlton, Jackson Browne, Michael Landau and Allan Holdsworth, among others.



Versoul Buxom 6

– Gold Lable 12 fret to body

The Versoul Buxom is a jumbo model. Kari Nieminen wanted to make a jumbo model with a big, fat sound, but without a too dominant bass. He also wanted it to have an even and dynamic tone that would suite both fingerpickers and rhythm players.

The Buxom 6 has a top of solid red cedar with scalloped bracings of maple. The sides, the back, the bridge plate and bridge pins are solid East Indian rosewood.

The bolt-on neck (bolted with two bolts) is made of aspen, a wood that according to Kari is more resonant than mahogany. He also uses this wood due to ecological reasons. The fretboard is East Indian rosewood and sports Dunlop 6150 frets. The nut and bridge are made of moose shinbone. The finish is natural nitrocellulose.

The soundhole has inlays of 23 carat gold leaf, and the pick guard is so called tortoise shell.

The gold plated hardware is Gotoh Waverly style. All Versoul models come with Hiscox Pro cases as standard. The Buxom 6 has the B-band UST (under saddle transducer) and the Core 99 preamp as an option.

PLAYABILITY

This has to be the most beautiful guitar I've ever seen. No wonder Kari has won so many design prizes. It's no frills and simplicity all the way, with attention to every detail. I love that little golden sun that sits on the head. I also love those fret marks on the side of the neck with their touch of gold. It is

easy to overdo things when you choose gold, but here everything is done with enormous refinement.

When I unpacked this guitar, the fact that there is no heel shocked me. I hadn't seen anything like this since the cheap Eko post-order guitars of the sixties. My fears turned out to be unjustified, this guitar sounds wonderful. A big fat tone, well balanced over the whole register. The idea of creating a jumbo model with a not too dominant bass, has turned out really well. The guitar has no cutaway, but due to the lack of heel, you will have easy access to the higher frets.

This model, with 12 frets to the body, is aimed at fingerpickers. The neck is a tad wider (44,5 mm at the nut, 56,5 mm at the 12:th fret) which gives you a bit more room between the strings. Something that many fingerpickers will welcome.

Kari Nieminen tells us that the specs were requested by John Hanlon, guitarist and producer for Neil Young and Jackson Brown among others.

The neck is made of Finnish aspen, but I can't say if it sounds better than mahogany. One thing is sure, it definitely does not sound worse. The ecological aspect is very clever. A guitar in the spirit of Greenpeace. Many hardwoods are increasingly threatened.

VERDICT

Buxom 6 is a complete guitar with a new design that provides something new and doesn't feel strained. Solid workmanship is in evidence all over the guitar – just check those labels inside the guitar. Gold, with Kari's handwritten signature. Most of all this is a fantastic sounding instrument. A guitar for die-hard fingerpickers and also perfect for rhythm.