

# **DREAMIN'** *California*

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BILL ASHER'S TINSELTOWN ROOTS

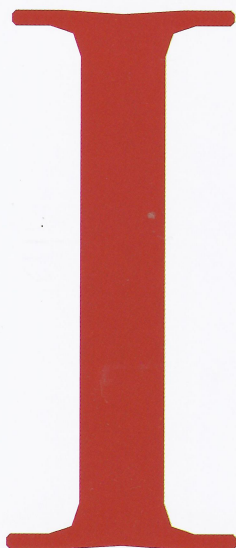












I first met Bill Asher 10 years ago, while I was writing a book about steel guitars. I'd noticed significant online scuttlebutt among steel players about a groundbreaking, solidbody electric lap steel he'd designed for musician Ben Harper. When we spoke, I quickly realized that here was someone who was absolutely passionate about what he does. Whether riffing about tone chamber placement, pickups, finishes or explaining the hoops he'd willingly jump through to please everyone from local players to demanding rock-star clients, Asher was clearly a man of strong opinions, but one who had his radar working overtime to understand exactly what musicians want and need from their instruments.

As I got to know him better, I learned that his years of repair experience, meticulous attention to detail and solid understanding of what makes guitars sound good had made him the first-call repair-

man and builder for a slew of collectors, dealers, local musicians and world-class pros like Ben Harper, Jackson Browne, John Frusciante, Cindy Cashdollar, Robert Randolph, Colin Hay, Marc Ford and many more A-listers. People who wouldn't let their own mother even look at their vintage guitar's case would happily entrust their axe to Bill.

As a kid, Bill Asher was drawn to the arts: painting, ceramics and woodworking in particular. But as the son of Hollywood insiders, the world of lutherie might easily have lost him to an acting career. His father, producer/director William Asher, directed most of the classic episodes of *I Love Lucy*. His mother, Elizabeth Montgomery, was a beloved television icon for her role as Samantha, the witchcraft-practicing housewife on the 1960s sitcom *Bewitched*. As a teenager, Asher couldn't help noticing the lifestyle successful actors enjoyed, and briefly considered following in their footsteps.

"My mom discouraged me highly; I mean, intentional discouragement," he recalls. "She said, 'It's a difficult business, there's a lot of rejection, and I think you should find something else that you want to do. If you're really absolutely passionate about it, go to drama school and become an actor, but I'm not going to help you.'" Chastened, the teenaged Asher returned to the wood shop and his obsession with guitars.

Like many Los Angeles teens in love with guitars, Asher started out jamming with friends and hanging at local hotspot Westwood Music, where owner Fred Walecki regaled him with stories about Orville Gibson and Leo Fender. Bill says these talks helped him connect the dots between guitars as objects and the very human craftsmen who'd made them.

For his senior shop project in high school, Asher built a Strat-inspired electric guitar. He showed the instrument to repairman Jeff Lunsford, one of the mainstays of the early '80s West L.A. guitar scene. Lunsford was impressed enough to offer Asher an apprenticeship that yielded him five years of invaluable experience in repairs, fretwork, guitar electronics and learning the customer service skills that build a business. When Lunsford was offered the full-time opportunity to build Bob Dylan's home recording studio, Asher went to his parents for an \$8,000 loan, bought Lunsford's tools, and at age 22 became a guitar-shop owner.

Asher puts the finishing touches on a Reso-Sonic guitar that features a hubcap cover plate from a 1958 Rambler. "I bought a handful of Rambler hubcaps from the late '50s, inspired by my buddy Larry Pogreba," Asher says.







"When I started out, I just wanted to be a guitar builder," explains Asher. "I feel lucky now that that didn't happen. I worked on repairs for 15 years before I built my first professional guitar. I'm really glad that I was here in L.A. where there's a great demand for repairs and working on really great vintage instruments. Working for pro players on nice guitars makes you take your work very seriously. There's no room for mistakes."

In the 1980s, more and more players experimented with modified electric guitars as builders mixed and matched electronics and intermingled the features of classic models in new ways. Asher was at the forefront of this trend and listened carefully to the players who came in asking for changes, such as putting a humbucking pickup in their Tele's bridge position for fatter tone, replacing a Tele neck with a Strat neck, or finding new ways to blend Fender twang with Gibson crunch.

"My first shop in the '80s was where I first met Jackson Browne. He walked into the store and I was like, 'Whoa! Jackson Browne just walked in!'" Asher remembers. "He hands me his Burgundy Mist Strat, on which one of the pickups had died, and asked if I could fix it. I said, 'Well, these are the Schecter pickups that Obe uses in his guitars, and I think I have a couple of old ones here.' He got really excited that this young kid knew what he needed: 'You know about these pickups?'"

Jackson Browne picks up the story: "One of the things that we got straight right away when we first started to work together was that I didn't really care as much about cosmetic stuff. I'm interested in what guitars end up sounding like. I didn't care about aging the saddle so it looked like it was original. Having somebody work on your instruments to make 'em play or keep 'em playing is a serious thing if you've got 14 or 125 instruments you tour with. They've all got to work. I've spent more time with Billy than I've ever spent with any luthier, playing the guitars and thinking about what I want and like, and for me, it's almost like having an in-house solution. I really kind of put myself in his hands. I don't know where I would be without him."

**Y**OU really have to pay attention to what you're doing," says Asher. "Guys like Jackson have a very particular way he wants a guitar set up, and he's looking for a particular sound. It taught me to be very versatile in my approach to working on guitars.

As a craftsman, you can kind of get into a groove of the way you think things should be done. I won't mention names, but we've had some guitar shops here in L.A. that were too opinionated, and that was their downfall. *This is the way it has to be done and you don't know what you're talking about.* I worked with pro players that I so respected them and did [repairs] the way they wanted to. It just took my skills to make it happen. That was a very valuable lesson for me."

Asher sold his first store in 1987, putting in stints with respected builders Rick Turner and Mark Lacey while gaining further experience in vintage restoration, repair, custom designs, sales and marketing. With Turner, Asher got the chance to work on instruments for high-profile bands and musicians like Fleetwood Mac, David Crosby, Steve Miller, Bonnie Raitt and T-Bone Burnett. "I was in the right place at the right time," he says. "Luckily, by the time I met Rick, I had the skills to run his repair department. I got introduced to a broader range of pro players, and working on instruments for them at that level of quality honed my skills so well."

Asher eventually re-established his own shop in Santa Monica, continuing to learn from his repairs on valuable vintage acoustics and electrics. He was also experimenting with his own take on classic Fender and Gibson designs that, over time, have evolved into his current line. Rather than slavishly copy classic designs, Asher took from each what he needed to realize his vision. "I think my guitars are aesthetically pleasing," he says. "I hear from players that the offset body has a very comfortable feel that brings the guitar closer to their body. They're initially drawn to the visual lines of the guitars, and when they plug them into their rig, they're sold."

Asher electrics are known for their sustain, and Bill feels that the way he constructs his necks is a big contributor. "I've worked on a lot of vintage Strats, and when I would try to remove those necks to adjust the truss rod, sometimes the neck wouldn't come off," he explains. "You'd have to hit with the heel of your hand, and sure enough, the lacquer had over the years molded into each other." For Asher, the lesson was clear: "The more you can get the neck to meld into the body, the better. People lean toward Les Pauls and other glued-neck guitars as being a step above a bolt-on neck guitar, but I think if you do the proper fitting and kind of meld the two pieces together with just a little bit of lacquer—that can be

Though he's best known for his electrics and lap steel guitars, Asher makes equally beautiful flattops. This is the tail block of a slope shoulder cutaway acoustic that he's building. The guitar sports quilted maple back and sides, a red spruce top and cocobolo binding.







After bookmatching koa and maple, Asher puts weights on the wood to keep it flat.









removable without too much trouble later on—I think you accomplish almost a set-neck transfer of tone into the body. People tell me that my Ultratone series definitely has a lot more sustain and more of a solid, glued-neck vibe to them.”

“For the headstock, I had to make a decision,” he explains. “Even though I was making guitars that are patently influenced by Leo Fender, I really felt that the three-on-a-side headstock design that Gibson stuck with—especially if you taper-in the headstock—would limit the break angle behind the nut. It added some stability for tuning, especially when using tremolo, and you can control the string angle behind the nut nicely at whatever headstock pitch you want.” Asher’s repair experience had also taught him that the area behind the nut was the place where headstocks tend to break. As a result, he uses an ebony faceplate on his headstocks to add mass, a volute behind the nut to reinforce the neck and quartersawn woods to aid tone transfer into the body.

Bill’s Telecaster-influenced T-Deluxe pays homage to its Fullerton roots, but takes some interesting side roads. His goal was to make a guitar for players who loved the simplicity of the Telecaster but wanted a different voicing with more tonal variety. “I didn’t want to make clone guitars,” he says. “If you want a great sounding, twangy Tele, you buy the Fender Telecaster. I didn’t feel like I needed to make one of those. I was really excited about creating my own sound in that guitar with those two-blade pickups, and redesigning the neck pickup to be much more of a broadband sound with a lot more clear lows, nice treble and a little warmer, kind of honkier bluesy tone out of the bridge pickup.”

Guitarist Marc Ford sparked the idea for Asher’s Stratocaster-influenced, double cutaway S-Custom guitars. “Marc approached me and said, ‘I just love playing a Stratocaster, but I want the tone of my Les Paul Special,’” explains Asher. “Doing a mahogany body build with hand-wound P-90s, I thought, would give him exactly what he was looking for for the Black Crows tour in 2005.” Asher views it as an honor to have the chance to collaborate in creating unique hybrid instruments that exactly suit a player’s style and help them achieve their goals on stage and in the studio.

Jackson Browne is another fan of the S-Custom design. He owns several Ashers, and recently ordered an alder model sporting a flamed maple top with trans-black finish and a pair of Tom Holmes humbuckers. As Browne puts it, “Bill’s guitars work in a particular way, and I don’t even know how to

describe it, except to say the playability’s amazing and the tone is incredible.

“We artists are always searching for various tones and sounds that will work, and he really listens to the people that play. When something works, it’s usually something you’ve found by accident, like a tuning you’ve found that sounds amazing. You hope that that thing will amplify well, and if it doesn’t, you have to keep working with it. In some cases we don’t succeed with one pickup, so we go on to another pickup and sometimes the project goes on for six months. Bill will stay with it; he’s with you on the search.”

Though he was initially somewhat unimpressed, Telecaster wizard Redd Volkaert is another convert to the Asher sound. As Asher recalls, “In 2009, I brought one of the first offset body Teles that I did to Redd’s concert at the Museum of Making Music, in Carlsbad, California. It had a P-90 in the neck and a stock Tele pickup in the bridge. He played it and said, ‘Bill, this is a pretty nicely made guitar, but nothing I haven’t seen before. It’s cool, but not really for me.’ He was very blunt about that. Then I ran into him at the Arlington, Texas, show three years ago and my updated T-Deluxe caught his eye. He went, ‘Whoa, what is that?’ He sat down and played it, and flipped over the neck shape and tone.” Volkaert loved the offset body and the feel of Asher’s evolved guitar, but he wanted more of the traditional Telecaster bite and twang. Asher responded with a prototype, he and Redd shook hands, and Asher now proudly offers a new Redd Volkaert signature model.

**B**EN Harper is another seeker on the road to tonal karma. In Asher, he found the perfect partner. As Harper explains, “It’s the perfect lap steel. Before I had the Asher, I was any which way but loose, just looking and seeking from builder to builder. Certain things are made with little or no room for improvement, and, like when Les Paul built the Les Paul or when Leo built the first Tele, Billy’s lap steel is one of those special instruments.”

It was guitar tech Bobby Carlos who first introduced Asher to vintage acoustic and electric lap steels. During down times in the shop, Carlos would point out the characteristics of various models and show Asher the rudiments of lap-steel technique and tunings. So when Ben Harper called one day in 1998, Asher was ready. As he recalls, “Ben said, ‘I need something that’s gonna give me more of an electric guitar’s sustain on stage so I can really cut



“When my first son was born, Billy showed up at my wife’s baby shower, and he brought for my son the most extraordinary handmade rattle you’ve ever seen: bird’s eye maple, ebony, abalone.” —*Ben Harper*

through a full band.” Asher mulled it over and came up with a design that echoed the shape of Harper’s trademark vintage Weissenborn acoustic guitars in a neck-through solidbody design.

For Asher’s taste, many vintage steels were lacking in low-end response, so he designed his guitar to be larger and removed wood via cylindrical tone chambers—hollowed-out sections—that reduced weight and added back some of the airiness of the acoustic steels. He topped the mahogany body with a figured koa top and used a traditional Weissenborn-style bridge shape that was strung through the body. After sending the prototype to Harper, as Asher recalls, “Ben called me back a week later and said, ‘I need two more for the road. How quick can you build them?’”

Ben Harper remembers: “Billy and I went through different generations until we finally hit the mark on it. Billy has a rare and deep command of both acoustics and electrics. He can bring out the acoustic nature of an electric and the electric nature of an acoustic. That’s something that sets him apart. When we started designing the signature model, he was able to incorporate hollow aspects of the Weissenborn into the solid maple cap signature model. I am as proud of that instrument as any song I’ve ever written. I’m not trying to take credit for something Billy made—it’s Billy’s brainchild—but he was kind enough to recognize I grew up in a music store, making and repairing instruments, so he utilized not only what I was looking for, but my understanding of what makes instruments tick. He let me be his copilot in the process.”

Asher realized their steel design had wider potential, and with Harper’s blessing, he established it as the Electro Hawaiian Model. The production guitar sported the chambered mahogany body and koa top of the prototype with a set of Tom Anderson

mini-humbucking pickups (nicknamed steelbuckers). The guitars were an instant hit with steel players and became renowned for their unique, cellolike tonal character.

Over time, Harper’s signature model changed to reflect the intensity of his music, with a design clearly influenced by Gibson’s Les Paul. “He liked the feel and the design of that neck-through-body concept, but needed something just a little bit more electric guitarlike and aggressive,” explains Asher. “I built him that prototype back around 2000, and that’s the prominent guitar he uses now. It’s Les Paul-inspired as far as electronics and hardware. It’s got a maple cap, Tone Pros Tune-O-Matic bridge and tuners plus two Seymour Duncan Custom Shop humbuckers. With this guitar, he gets much more of that classic, raw slide tone.”

As Asher explains, “One of my big inspirations to come up with different models was I wanted lap steel players to have the same luxury of pickup, hardware and tone options as guitar players who have a plethora to choose from. I thought the lap steel was lacking that so that’s why I keep designing the different models of steels. It’s been very exciting for me to be one of the first guys to kind of reinvent the electric lap steel for modern guitar players.”

Steel guitar guru Jerry Byrd advocated that a short, 22.5-inch scale was the ideal length for lap steel, because the physics of that scale facilitate intonation and playability for his demanding slant-bar technique. However, many pro players rarely use slants and Asher feels a 25-inch scale makes his instruments more approachable for a standard guitar player to be able to cross over to playing lap steel. “I think that what I’m doing with the longer scale and the multiple pickups and the larger body takes the lap steel to a more versatile place,” he explains. “You can play any style of music on electric






Asher and his small crew average around 120 guitars and lap steels per year.









Various heel cap and inlay sketches at Asher's workshop. "When we do inlay and scrimshaw work on our instruments I like it to have a personal connection to the customer," he says. "I am not into doing elaborate artwork on guitars just for the sake of it. I want the customer to be involved with that process so it becomes not only a unique piece but an instrument that has some deeper meaning to the musician who plays it." Asher's first commissioned art was a volcano heel cap on a 000-4K ordered by the Stooges' James Williamson. The swimming turtle shown here was done at the request of singer-songwriter Jillian Speer.





20-1-18  
1 5/8" NUT  
60° C' shape  
Asher 2012  
E Custom  
6155 FAETS

Deep C' shape  
1 5/8" NUT  
Mace Ford model  
Asher 2018  
6155 FAETS

85  
1 5/8" NUT  
60° C' shape  
Asher 2012  
E Custom  
Durlap 6100 FAETS

1 5/8" NUT  
60° C' shape  
Asher 2012  
E Custom  
6155 FAETS

1 5/8" NUT  
60° C' shape  
Asher 2012  
E Custom  
6155 FAETS



Asher hand writes each guitar's specs on the neck heel. In addition to the customer's name, you'll find neck shape information, the nut width and any other pertinent details.

guitars on Gibson Les Paul or Fender scales, which are right around 25 inches, jazz, blues, rock or country. I've been approached to make some short-scale steels," he says, "and I did a couple

custom ones, but the short scale never really fit in with what I wanted to do."

Asher took the design to Asia for his Electro-Hawaiian Jr. line, a more affordable, off-the-shelf alternative to his custom models. "Hand-building guitars is a very time-consuming and expensive venture," he explains. "It's a passion of mine that I love doing, so I tried to build them in the shop and offer them at an affordable price, but I still had to charge \$1,200 to \$1,400 to make it work. I wanted to open up a whole new audience of lap-steel players, so I realized I was gonna have to go to overseas production and spend a lot more money with the manufacturer to get the quality that I demand. That way, I could keep it around \$799 retail to allow a player to get a modern Asher lap steel at an affordable price. I think it's opened up the door for a lot of people who may not have had a chance to experience lap steel. We've built and shipped more than 500 of those now."

**A**FTER making meticulously accurate Weissenborn-influenced acoustic lap steels for several years, Asher's employee Jim Dugan suggested they build a Spanish-neck acoustic guitar that would commemorate Hermann Weissenborn's rare original. As Asher explains, "We took the 000 body size and the color, scalloped the braces like a 1930s lightly braced acoustic and added the rope binding and a beautifully shaped five-piece neck. It turned out to be magic." The first models went to former Iggy Pop and the Stooges guitarist James Williamson and singer/songwriter Jillian Spear, who took it straight into the studio. As Asher recalls, "The engineers were just blown away. We're now building these by custom order—about 10 a year—split between the commemorative Weissenborns [acoustic steels] and the flattop acoustics."

The shop's newest model, originally built for Colin Hay, is a round-shoulder, spruce-topped acoustic based on Gibson's Southern Jumbo, sporting 40-year-old Brazilian rosewood for the back and sides. Asher's years of repair experience have given him a window into an instrument's future. "Thirty years from now it's gonna need a neck set, but you

don't want your rims or your bracing coming loose 20 or 30 years down the road," he explains. "That's why I use the more modern LMI glue for all the bracing and the structure of the guitar, but we're using hide glue on our bridges and neck sets for tonal reasons. Hide glue is stable, gets nice and hard, and the tone transfer for hide glue is much better than the newer Titebonds 'cause they always maintain some elasticity, which deadens and slows down the tone transfer."

**A**SHER is now up and running at his new 1,200 sq. ft. shop in Culver City. Four luthiers can work there simultaneously, and Asher keeps it partially in the family with his brother helping out in the shop and wife Jessica handling the business side of things. While success has enabled him to step away from standard repairs, Asher wants to keep his business from getting too large.

"I'm only doing vintage restoration by appointment or referral since we're focusing most of our energy on building," he says. "At this shop size, we can build about 100 guitars a year, and that's feeling pretty comfortable for me at this point. I still have a great passion for vintage guitar restoration, and it gives me a great connection to the players, so I want to maintain this small, exclusive shop where we build maybe 100 guitars a year and keep the demand there. That way I can still maintain my relationships with the L.A.-based artists. If I went to a factory model, it would be harder to keep up the personal side of my business."

It's the personal touch that has kept Jackson Browne a loyal Asher customer for more than 20 years. "He's a wonderful artist. He's really able to put himself at the service of another person's ideals. Nothing throws him, and the stuff he makes is flawless in tone and playability."

As to the mysterious blend of craftsmanship, taste, über-customer service, and Hollywood flash that goes into every Asher guitar, Ben Harper sums it up as well as anyone. "They're utilitarian; they're absolutely elegant and at the highest level of craftsmanship and artisanship. At a certain point, what's gonna separate these great builders from one another? Is a part of the essence of who they are in the tone, in the craftsmanship, and in the feel? Billy's soul is in the instruments. I know that may sound like a cliché, but I tell you, his soul and spirit are in everything he builds." **FJ**