

# Professional Luthier Interview – Robert O’Brien

**“The learning curve for luthiers is very long but I encourage anyone embarking on this journey to enjoy the ride!”**



## **O’Brien Guitars - Parker, Colorado USA**

### **Maker of fine classical and steel string acoustic guitars**

Having admired Robert’s work and teaching technique from afar, I felt honoured when he agreed to take part in this interview. See some of Robert’s helpful videos in my [other pages](#) on YouTube and [O’Brien Guitars](#) website. Check out the pictures at the end of this post for a beautiful example of Robert’s Custom Ukulele Luthiery.

### **Tell me about your journey... Were you a player first? What inspired you to take the plunge and build?**

Probably like most of us that get involved in building musical instruments, I had woodworking experience and played guitar. The next step is to build your own instrument. So, while living in Brazil I had the opportunity of learning from Antonio Tessarin, one of the most highly regarded Brazilian luthiers.

### **In the beginning what was the building process like? Were there any unforeseen events?**

I was very fortunate in that I had a great teacher. I didn’t have to try and learn on my own from a book or video. This shaved years off the learning curve and probably saved me a ton of money as well. Don’t get me wrong. I made my share of mistakes! haha In fact, I tell my students that come to study with me in my shop that the only reason I am able to teach is that I have made every mistake that can be made at least twice!

### **What choices were you faced with during the build process?**

The biggest problem I faced was space. I was living with my wife in São Paulo, a city of 18 million plus people, in a small studio apartment. I had a small bench, some power and hand tools as well as all my supplies in the apartment with us. I don’t know how I am still married but I am! I remember spending long hours building guitars on our small kitchen island. I even finished the guitars in that apartment. My work area was so small I could stand in the middle of the floor and touch all four

walls. My second biggest problem was access to building materials as well as tools and jigs. Everything I had needed to be imported at great expense.

### **What advice did you seek and where did you get it?**

As I mentioned earlier, I had a great teacher, Antonio Tessarin. I learned how to build classical guitars under his watchful eye. I would take two subway trains out to his side of town, usually while carrying my materials, and then walk another mile or so to his house. I did this every Saturday afternoon for a couple of years. He would set his projects aside and give me his attention and knowledge. I am still trying to repay that debt!

### **What about the results of your first attempts at building? Were you delighted or devastated?**

Fortunately my very first guitar was as good if not better than the high end guitar I had been playing for a number of years. I attribute this to the great teach I had. With the good foundation I got I have been able to improve on every instrument I have made. Of course some turn out better than others but I have been blessed in the results department.

### **What motivated you to continue and become a professional luthier?**

Good question. I never wanted to be a professional luthier. I saw first hand how difficult it was to make a full time living at this profession. Antonio used to jokingly tell me that lutherie is not a profession but rather punishment! In 2003 I lost a tech job and decided to contact a local college that had a great woodworking program. I wanted to improve my period furniture skills. I was asked to bring a sample of my work. I took in a guitar. Upon opening the case the director asked me if I wanted to teach. That is how my lutherie career began, as a teacher. I started a lutherie program within the woodworking department. The first year we had 11 students. When I left the college to go out on my own we had over 100 students a semester in a variety of classes: classical, steel string, electric, ukulele, mandolin and violin building, drum making, setup and repair, and instrument finishing. It was quite the experience with a ton of stories. I stopped counting the number of guitars my students built when we reached 500. Since leaving the college I now give classes in my personal shop to people from all over the world. This year alone (2014) I am expecting students from Brazil, Taiwan, Italy, Belgium, Canada and of course the United States.

### **Where are you now with your luthiery and what do you see for the future?**

I almost consider myself more of a teach of lutherie than a luthier as I am so busy teaching others these days to build their own instruments. Of course I still produce my own instruments for clients and dealers but the demand for teaching others how to build is really increasing. So much so that I launched online courses via my website to help meet the demand. These course are very detailed and cover every step in the guitar building and finishing process for classical, steel string and electric guitars. I also have courses on tool sharpening, rosette making and finishing. This together with making videos for my popular Luthier Tips du Jour video series on Youtube keeps me very busy. Did I mention that I have two kids that play hockey? Now that is a full time job all by itself!

### **How about an insight into your luthier's philosophy? Do you have a message to the amateur luthier community?**

I am often asked if it is possible to make a living as a luthier. Well, in my case it has worked out but you have to pay your dues. A wise friend once told me that it doesn't matter what you do in life. What is important is that you become the very best at what you do. People will then seek out your services. The learning curve for luthiers is very long but I encourage anyone embarking on this journey to enjoy the ride. It can be a very rewarding experience. I think the future of lutherie is very bright. However, finding high quality materials is becoming somewhat of an issue due to supply and demand as well as environmental aspects. Happy Building!



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