

COCKPIT ARTS 3 YEARS

Alex Bishop

- *Guitar Maker*



On the opening nights of Cockpit Arts' Deptford Open Studios, the sound of Alex Bishop's gypsy guitar can be heard resonating soulfully through the corridors. It's been a tradition since Alex arrived in 2011 as an awardee of Cockpit Arts/NADFAS with his fledgling guitar making business. With a steady stream of commissions and his reputation as a teacher and repairer growing, he is fast establishing a name for himself in the gypsy guitar world.

Having left a degree in Aerospace Engineering in Bath, Alex moved to London in 2007 and enrolled on a musical instruments course at London Metropolitan University. He graduated in 2010 with a First Class Honours, the 'Top Thirty Student' award and the 'University Recognition Award for Academic Excellence'. In the same year, he applied for the Cockpit Arts/NADFAS (The National Association for Decorative & Fine Arts Societies) award and moved in to his Deptford studio in February 2011. The award supports designer-makers practicing a traditional craft that requires skills at risk of dying out. Alex was given a subsidised studio space in Cockpit's Deptford incubator, including the free in-house business support available to all studio holders. "I came to Cockpit fresh from studying instrument making, so the award was really important for giving me that initial buffer to start work without the added financial pressure," says Alex. "It's the first rung on the ladder, and the hardest one."

Alex comes from a musical family, and his twin brothers Mike and Pete form two thirds of British indie band The Bishops, with whom he has played in the past. So right from the beginning, Alex has had several strands to his business: playing, making guitars, teaching and repair work. During his time at Cockpit, much of his focus with the Business Development Team has been on striking the right balance between these different revenue streams. "Since moving to Cockpit, my reputation for repair work and as a teacher have become really well cemented," he says. "Having a studio in Deptford means I'm perfectly situated for local work. There are no other guitar shops in the area, which leaves me to service the local musical population both with repair work and teaching."



Initially, Alex took on extra repair work in order to build an income, but with his commission work growing over the last three years there has been a shift in focus. "I'm happy to accept commissions, but I'm becoming more keen to make and sell my own designs," he says. "I envisage a 50/50 split of making speculatively and making to commission. It's a more ambitious vision for the business." Alex says his one-to-one meetings with David Crump, Head of Business Development, have been invaluable throughout this process for keeping him on track and helping him to make the right decisions. "It's almost like therapy," he says. "It's crucial being able to vocalise my thoughts and it helps give me direction."

Alex says this support was particularly vital when he recently had to deal with a tricky customer. "99% of my customers are fantastic, but I had one client who tried to persuade me that some repair work I had done for him was inadequate," Alex sighs. "I felt he was taking advantage of the fact that I was a relative newcomer to the business." When the situation escalated, Alex turned to David for help. "It was great having someone on hand to guide me through the process. I knew I hadn't done anything wrong, but it was the added confidence David gave me. Without his support it would have been much harder to deal with that situation." In the end, after a lot of

time-consuming letter writing, Alex was able to head off a trip to the small-claims court, and the matter was settled. "Had things escalated further, however, I felt Cockpit would still have been able to help," he says confidently.

As the business has steadily grown, and Alex has become busier as a result, he says he has needed David's support more and more. Alex now meets with David every couple of months, or more. "There are new problems and dilemmas that I always need help with," he says. "My time management and scheduling were things that needed specific attention. David has helped me with the infrastructure of business. I now have proper booking in systems for repair work and invoicing systems. It's evolved into something very streamlined."

In January of this year Alex was awarded Artist in Residence at The Pound Arts Centre in Corsham, near Bath, where he now carries out all his guitar making, as well as running workshops and jam sessions. He now splits his time between the southwest and London, commuting to his Deptford studio two days a week where he continues to teach and oversee repair work. "I'm in a transition phase at moment," he says. "With all the business processes I have learnt at Cockpit, I now have a structure in place and the mechanisms to do what I do, and I'm beginning to take that outside of Cockpit. But at the same time I don't want to break my links with Cockpit any time soon. I see it as an off shoot of what I do rather than the entirety of it."



www.alexbishopguitars.com

Photos: www.aluncallender.com