



# Independent State

Forming a new high-end guitar company in the wake of one of the biggest financial crises of recent times seemed doomed to failure. A decade on, however, and Knaggs is doing very nicely...

Words Dave Burrluck

It's not the first time we've visited Knaggs HQ – in an old 1912 baseball glove factory in Greensboro, Maryland – but once again we're struck by its laid-back vibe. Since our last visit, little has changed; a couple of new faces augment the team – all are ex-PRS. Danny Dedo looks after the single Fadal CNC like it's an extension of his body, and it's seemingly the only modern tool, surrounded by traditional chisels, planes and jigs. Yet since the team kicked things off in early 2010, Knaggs has shipped just under 4,000 instruments and currently produces around 40 a month. It's a far cry from PRS who makes almost that number of Core-level guitars *every day*, while that is dwarfed again by Gibson who we understand is making around 350 guitars a day in its USA production plant alone. A very different scale.

But it's the way co-founders, Joe Knaggs and Peter Wolf, like it.

"At the moment, yes, it's about 40. If we increased that number – ideally to 50, maybe 60 a month – and if the demand is there and increasing, you can go, 'Okay, we've now got quite a back-order, so it's time to beef things up a bit and make more guitars.' We have no desire to be this big company. We're in a very different time to when Paul [Reed Smith] started his factory – there was a window of opportunity for a return to quality. Today, there are a lot of great guitar makers, Collings, PRS... That window is barely open. But I believe it's open enough for the people who do it right, are very careful in what they do, and don't get too big for their breeches."

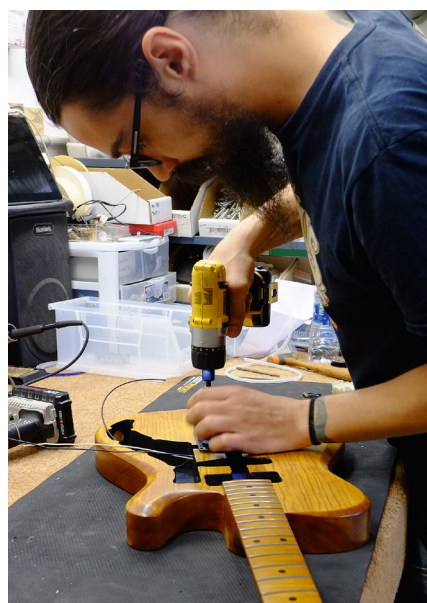
For such a relatively small output, Knaggs offers around 16 different models, including basses and acoustics. The range

is split between the 648mm (25.5-inch) scale length Chesapeake models (the Choptank, Severn, Severn X, the new offset Tuckahoe and the Severn bass) and the 629mm (24.75-inch) scale Influence models (the Kenai, Kenai-J, Chena, Keya, Sheyenne and latest SG-inspired Honga). Then there are the signature models for Steven Stevens, Doug Rappoport, Eric Steckel and Larry Mitchell. The pie is topped with the "one of a kind" Creation series. Quite a choice.

That Kenai has now become more of a family with the Doug Rappoport and Eric Steckel signatures and a thicker-body T/S version, and it also spawned the SS1, SS2 and SSC Steve Stevens signatures. It's little surprise, then, that the Kenai accounts for around a third of all the models made in the past decade, although the Severn still leads, but not by much.



Opposite: The original Knaggs hollow-bodied Severn (left) and the Choptank were Joe's first own-brand designs. This page: Joe Knaggs (below) leads a 10-strong team of hugely experienced ex-PRS luthiers, including Danny Dedo at the CNC and Dave Hazel (bottom left) fitting a neck





"The Kenai is catching up," offers Peter Wolf, "and maybe in the upcoming months it'll pass the Severn. We've got the different versions of the Kenai, so there are different artists attached to it. Now, with the latest Kenai-J, there's a lower price point, too."

Originally, Knaggs offered a three-tier system, from player's grade (Tier 3) up to collector specification (Tier 1), but "that's kinda wandered into a different spot for us", Joe explains. "It got really complicated as people wanted to combine features from the different tiers – all good, but now we've moved to an *à la carte* system, so you can get a Kenai with a Tier 1-grade figured maple top but with dots – previously a Tier 3-appointment; or you can get a Tier 3-level figured top but with Morning Star inlays – previously only available on a Tier 2 upwards. Now, each model has its base specification and then there's an option list.

"We hardly make anything for stock," continues Joe, "but one of the hurdles is you can get six high-dollar orders in. Each has a 'brick wall' [some aspect to extend or hold up the build time], but we have to keep the train moving, so to do that we'll stick in some regular orders. What I mean is that it might be that we have a special top in the store, so let's run that. Or I might have three extra Morning Star-inlaid fingerboards – sometimes I'll order extra inlays [from inlay specialist, Pearl Works], but then we don't

**"What really started the company was the Choptank's bridge... With it, the guitar just rang"**

get orders immediately. Perfectly good, nothing wrong, let's go and make a guitar out of them."

With many brands, large and small, build time can run into many months, even years, but Knaggs seems more sorted than many, despite the varied model line-up and all the possible options.

"I think it's safe to say that build time is around eight to 12 weeks," says Joe. "A lot of times it will be quicker. For a more complex specification it may be longer, obviously."

### Joe's Guitar

If the Severn and the Kenai are Joe's stylised takes on the Stratocaster and Les Paul respectively, the Choptank can easily claim to be the first proper Knaggs guitar: the guitar that launched the idea of the company (though, technically, it was the second guitar Joe had designed outside of PRS after a hollow-bodied Severn).



This Severn X is a more contemporary version of the original Severn, still Knaggs' best-selling guitar

"Yeah, what really started the company," confirms Joe, "was the Choptank's bridge. Me and my buddy Eric Johnson [not the Eric Johnson – Ed] made it and I put it on the Choptank I was designing – this was when I was still at PRS and I used to go over to Eric's and work on guitars at the weekends. I was looking at the Telecaster bridge and wondering why they didn't screw it down at the front. I'd always felt they were losing a bit of ground there. So we made the bridge, a little thicker out of good hardened steel, and screwed it down back and front. When we did that the guitar just rang – as good as I've heard a guitar ring. So that made me think, there's something here.

"But I was also trying to design the Choptank to take in some of the Strat that I've played all my life, a '61, but I wanted to enhance the guitar. So I made an angle on the headstock so there was no string tree; I made an 8.5-inch radius so that unlike the

[Fender original] 7.25-inch, it wouldn't fret out but still gives you a very similar feel – and then that bridge just tied it all together.

"Later on we took the same bridge and chopped it in half to make a vibrato. We put a pin in there, but that didn't work as well as we'd hoped, so we made a ball-bearing pivot design instead and it worked like a champ. So that's the Chesapeake hardtail and tremolo bridge.

"The gist behind both those bridges is that I'm looking for sustain, so the note would feed on itself better and maybe add slightly more complex harmonics. Not everyone wants that and I don't look at those bridges as necessarily 'better'. I look at them as different tools and ones that certain musicians will think, 'Okay, this is great, it's giving me a different sound.'"

The very limited-run Choptank, aka Joe's Guitar, celebrates that first instrument and is closely based on that guitar, a replica really.





Steve Stevens' SSC is known at Knaggs as the "chunk monster": a thicker-sounding version of the Kenai with conventional two-piece bridge setups



Doug Rappoport's signature model is based on the Kenai with an added kill switch, plus a Seymour Duncan SH-2N Jazz at the neck and the lesser-known Duncan Custom Shop zebra-coiled '78 at the bridge

"There's no question that's the guitar that I play, but there's no question that it feels like Knaggs to me. We have plenty of other designs, of course, and they're all a part of Knaggs, too. But, for me personally, there's just something about the Choptank that really sits nice with me."

"I've never been into 25.5-inch scale lengths and six-in-a-line headstocks," says Peter. "I've always lent towards the carved top, three-a-side tuner style: the Gibson camp. But when I first saw the Choptank I thought it was a lot better-looking than a Telecaster. I thought the headstock was one of the most beautiful six-in-a-line shapes I'd ever seen and I still think that today. I always come from a shape point of view first, so I thought it was an incredible-looking guitar with an incredible-looking headstock. But then I played it and it was a completely different animal. It sounded great. I was a happy camper!"

While a key part of the range, the Severn out-sells the Choptank by three to one.

"Ironically, we didn't get a lot of orders for a while," says Joe, "but lately we've been getting a bunch – I'm talking 35 or 40 orders out of the blue."

"I think it has something to do with the fact we have a pretty strong Choptank presence in Nashville," adds Peter. "There's Morgan Wallen – he's been blowing up with *Whiskey Glasses*. His guitarists Dominic Frost and Tyler Tomlinson, and Luke Rice the bass player, are all Knaggs players."

"I have to say that country music is the genre supporting the musical instrument industry by far [the most] compared to any other genre: guitars, both acoustic and electric," states Joe.

"The guitar playing and the level of professionalism these [country music] bands have is just so incredibly high," adds Peter. "And we can't just throw guitars at

players like many companies have done. We have to be pretty selective."

### Tradition With A Twist

While the numerous Knaggs designs certainly reference many of the classics, the elements of the Knaggs build – from the outline shapes through the body contours, not to mention those proprietary bridge designs – give each design its own voice and feel. The raw materials, however, are typically classic, and wood selection is fundamental and based on decades of experience. The Influence guitars centre on all-mahogany construction typically with a maple top.

"We want mahogany at a certain weight limit and also a little wider than many," explains Joe. "Our guitars are a little wider and we have to have wood that is 14 inches or wider. Weight is important – we need light, not least in that size."



"With neck blanks we buy in 12 quarter [three-inch], so we can turn it either way to make sure we get it as quarter-sawn as we can. Especially with mahogany, that's a very big issue. We do the same with our maple necks. Those are quarter-sawn, too, and it makes the wood more stable and stiffer, and the more stable a guitar is the more it will resonate. Not necessarily the more hard it is but the more stable it is. Originally, Strat necks and that were flat-sawn, they used a one-inch-thick slab – a genius thing that Leo did – but at the same time they can have a tendency to twist more, so the more quartered the neck is, the less tendency there is for it to twist.

"We use South American mahogany for our neck blanks," he continues, "it's a very stable wood. African [mahogany] is pretty stable, too, but it doesn't have quite the same qualities. For a body wood it's fine and it sounds great, but not from the standpoint of making a great neck blank. I'm not saying you can't use it for neck blanks, but it's not what we use it for.

"The cost of quality wood is definitely rising, but I should say mahogany has been pretty stable recently. Figured maple has definitely risen: it's getting harder to find and the price is going up for sure; quilted maple especially has gone really high."

As many small makers have experienced, the recent restrictions and paperwork

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required to export a guitar with an East Indian rosewood fingerboard has meant Knaggs has been using Macassar ebony on export models.

"Luckily they're just starting to lift the bans. We were stifled by all of that with the necessary documentation," says Joe. "I recently got some quarter-sawn Nicaraguan rosewood that as soon as I saw it I ordered more. It was dynamite. When I tapped it, it sounded like Brazilian [rosewood]. That's what we've used on this run of Joe's Guitars. But East Indian rosewood has been our main one over the years."

Tapping wood blanks might fall into the mystic art of guitar making for some, but it certainly informs the woods Joe favours.

"Brazilian rosewood rings at a lot of different frequencies – that's why people love it, because you get lows, mids and highs out of it. East Indian [rosewood] has a bit of a lower pitch, you get a little more lows of it,



This custom model, made for Steve Stevens, has a re-engineered version of his famous ray-gun circuit and stutter switch. Not for the faint-hearted



The Tukahoe is the latest addition to the Chesapeake range. Awaiting assembly, this one has a snakeskin finish. Yes, fishnets were involved!

but it still rings beautifully. This Nicaraguan stuff I came across rings beautifully, almost like those three different frequencies [of Brazilian rosewood].

"When it comes to matching different woods, though, that's a different story. When we're talking about acoustic guitars, you might be talking about a mahogany neck, which will give you some good lower mids. You might have an ebony fingerboard that's going to give you some highs and some lows – the spruce top will do the same as this – then you might have mahogany back and sides, which again will give you mids. So what you're doing is you're combining the woods together to cover the frequency ranges.

"A Fender Stratocaster and that type of guitar with the longer 25.5-inch scale length tends to have the mids scooped out – it's all highs and lows – and I've always been a big fan of that. That's because of the scale

length, the angle of the neck... but a lot of it has to do with the woods, though. Again, that's where it starts. So what you're doing is combining woods that by their nature have a certain character or frequency.

"These combinations are time-tested – people are using them, and have used them, for a reason. We used to joke that back in the 70s Fender were using Mountain ash that was too heavy to even make baseball bats out of. Those guitars were bright and really didn't ring that well. Mind you," laughs Joe, "they go for pretty good money now! But they really didn't ring very good.

"There's a certain recipe that you use," says Joe in conclusion. "It can vary a little bit and I don't want every guitar to sound the same – I want them to sound a little different. I want you to pick up five guitars. You might think they all sound great, but you like one the best. It's like picking out a puppy," he laughs. **G**