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HOLY CRIPES!

The Story of *Jerry Garcia's* Last Guitars

Steve Cripe left a unique legacy in the annals of music history. He was not a guitar player, not a songwriter. In fact, you may not even know his name. But the guitar builder became part of the fabric that makes up the story of the Grateful Dead when he built guitars for the legendary Jerry Garcia during the final years of the musician's life.

By Steve Armato and James D. McCallister

(TOP) Jerry Garcia with the Cripe-built guitar called Lightning Bolt. (ABOVE) Lightning Bolt. (LEFT) Steve Cripe.

Cripe photo courtesy of Pat O'Donnell. Garcia photo: Rick Gould. Bolt hoto courtesy Steve Armato.

Garcia long favored the work of another builder, Doug Irwin, whose custom instruments – known to the band and its fans as Wolf, Tiger, and Rosebud – were played at Dead concerts for almost 20 years. Garcia was loyal to his Irwins throughout his career.

Cripe traveled an unorthodox road that led him from crafting ornate woodwork interiors for luxury yachts to collaborating with the venerable icon.

"He was always good with his hands," said Cripe's older sister, Rhonda Williams. "He worked almost exclusively with exotic woods," and she said he became interested in building guitars because he wanted to learn to play them.

In July, 1990, Cripe bought a how-to book on electric-guitar construction. But despite his in-depth knowledge of woodworking, success was limited due to what he termed as "errors" in the book; his first guitar had "...a neck the size of a baseball bat." Nonetheless, inspired by the Dead's cover of "Morning Dew," a guitar-driven staple of the band's live repertoire, the longtime Deadhead decided to build another guitar, but this time one intended expressly for his idol.

Building on Garcia's taste for Irwin's guitars, he emulated the body style of Irwin's Tiger, and, referencing only a VHS copy of the Dead's video *So Far*, studied Tiger as it appeared in 1985. He built two prototype guitars in this fashion. The top and back of one is lignum vitae, with a core of greenheart, and a laminated Brazilian rosewood/maple neck. Inlaid in the Brazilian rosewood fretboard is a lightning bolt of lignum vitae sapwood. The top and back of the other are Cocobolo with a Zebrawood core, while the neck is laminated Cocobolo, maple, and rosewood with an ebony fretboard. Inscribed on the cover of its electronics cavity is, "Prototype of J. Garcia's Lightning Bolt Guitar, June 92, S. R. Cripe." Both guitars have 22 frets.

After he realized Garcia's preference for 24-fret guitars, Cripe began work on one in March, 1993. The guitar, dubbed Lightning Bolt, was completed one month later, and Cripe described it in an article he wrote in '95 for Dead fanzine *Unbroken Chain*. "Lightning Bolt is made of a black walnut core and East Indian rosewood top and back, with rock maple for contrast. The neck is also made of the same rosewood and maple. The East Indian rosewood is recycled from an old opium bed that was given to me a few years ago. The fretboard is of Brazilian rosewood recycled from an old hotel in Miami Beach. The lightning bolt itself is mother-of-pearl surrounded by padauk, tinted maple, and rosewood."

Pat O'Donnell, proprietor of Resurrection Guitars, makes Cripe replicas and notes how Cripe created the guitar's unique green color by applying a coat of blue with a felt-tip pen before putting lacquer on its maple body.

Like Irwin's method of construction for Tiger and Rosebud – sandwiching layers of wood horizontally to make the bodies – Cripe built the "wings" of the body of Lightning Bolt with three layers of wood laminated horizontally. But at its heart is a nine-ply vertically laminated neck/center block that extends the length of the guitar. The result? Massive sustain.

The volute, the bulbous mass of wood at the base of the headstock, is another distinct feature of Cripe's guitars. And no two are the same; guitarist Steve Kimock, who owns two Cripes – one made of teak, the other ebony – said of the volutes, "Who knows what [Cripe's] intention was? It may have been equal parts attempt to strengthen that area of the neck, which was a great idea, and give a little more physical balance to the instrument."

Satisfied with the guitar, Cripe embarked on a campaign to get the instrument to Garcia. This was ultimately accomplished through a record-company contact friendly with Garcia collaborator David Grisman. Weeks went by before Cripe came home one day to hear Grateful Dead publicist Dennis McNally on his answering machine, saying Garcia was

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(LEFT) Top Hat. (MIDDLE) The hard-to-miss volute on Cripe guitars. (RIGHT) The back of Bolt reveals the laminate construction and neck-through design.

Top Hat, Volute, and Back photo courtesy Steve Armato.

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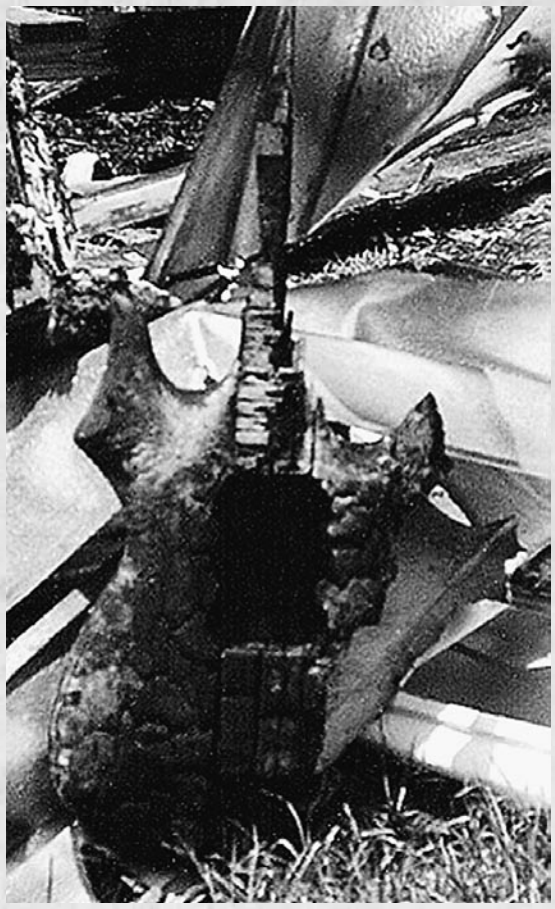

The guitar that was to be called Masterpiece, after the deadly fire in Steve Cripes' workshop.

"intrigued" and "fiddling around" with the instrument.

A month later, Garcia tech Steve Parish contacted Cripe with a flurry of questions. The conversation led to the official naming of what was to become Garcia's primary instrument. And Cripe was surprised to learn that Garcia had already been playing it with the Jerry Garcia Band, and that he planned to play it at Dead shows in Oregon.

Parish also said Garcia wanted to order another guitar. Honored – and motivated – Cripe delivered Top Hat in November of '93, this time consulting with Gary Brawer, of Brawer Stringed Instrument Repair, an expert in the electronics of Garcia's Irwin guitars, including the MIDI modifications Garcia required.

During the construction of Top Hat, Cripe called Parish while the band was at Madison Square Garden. He asked Parish to measure Lightning Bolt so he could match the neck to that guitar, Parish responded, "How did you make the first one?" Cripe replied that he "... winged it." Parish, then Garcia himself, told Cripe to use his intuition again. "If I don't like it," Garcia said, "I'll send it back."

Top Hat has a walnut-and-maple core, Cocobolo top, back, neck, and fretboard, and was named for the motif on the battery cover – a skull wearing a red, white, and blue top hat. The inlay is also made of non-endangered warthog tusk, as are the fretboard and Cripe's firecracker logo inlays. And though the guitar never made an appearance onstage, it was also never returned.

In December, 1993, Cripe realized his first sale as a luthier, receiving a check from Grateful Dead Productions, Inc. The stub on the $7,000 check says, "2 custom guitars for Garcia; OK per Parish."

Cripe finally met Garcia backstage at a Dead show in Miami in the spring of '94. They spoke for 45 minutes, with Garcia praising Cripe's work. Later, at a '95 Tampa show, Parish told Cripe that Lightning Bolt was "...holding up better than any guitar Jerry has ever owned." He also said that Garcia enjoyed playing Top Hat at home.

Garcia commissioned two more guitars from Cripe, one to be made at Cripe's discretion, another to be a refinement of what he'd accomplished with the first two.

Hal Hammer, Jr., who mentored Cripe as he learned to build guitars, recalls that Cripe was reluctant to send the resultant guitar – called Eagle – because "... [it] looked so much like a Weir guitar. But he still thought it would be cool to send a couple guitars and let Garcia choose."

While still working on the second guitar, Cripe's mission would change after Garcia's untimely death in August of '95. Steve decided to finish the guitar, now fittingly called Tribute, in honor of the late musician. Adam Palow, who was eager to apprentice with Cripe in Florida, says of the guitar, "[it] has 64 pieces of mother-of-pearl inlay, a nine-ply neck, an eight-ply body with a 1/2" cocobolo top, piezo pickups, three humbuckers, an effects loop, and the cover plate features the planet Saturn with sterling silver rings."

According to Hammer, Cripe was working on yet another guitar, called Masterpiece. But on May 21, 1996, Cripe was in his workshop, using high-phosphorous gunpowder in pursuit of another passion, making custom fireworks. An explosion occurred and Cripe was killed. Masterpiece, too, was lost in the fire.

Following the tragedy, *The St. Petersburg Times* reported that a neighbor, Jack Smith, had admired a guitar in Cripe's workshop that appeared to be almost done. Smith said he was struck by the material Cripe was using – black wood. "It was a beauty," Smith said, adding that he enjoyed visiting his neighbor's workshop. "I lost a friend," he added. So, too, did guitar enthusiasts everywhere.

Stephen Ray Cripe's Lightning Bolt and Top Hat are on display at the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland. Eagle and Tribute remain in private collections.

Steve Armato recently launched cripeguitars.com and is writing a book on Cripe guitars. James D. McCallister is a novelist, freelance writer, and Deadhead. Special thanks to Nick Meriwether and to the family and friends of Steve Cripe. VG

Photo courtesy Steve Armato.