

## Rock & Roller Coaster

*Scott Baxendale survived the ride, from partying with the gods of rock to a crack-induced crime spree, finding redemption in a small shop on Colfax.*

“To make a guitar by hand,” Scott Baxendale says as he bends over a neck that needs just a little more sanding for a guitar he’s building at his Colfax Street shop, “is to make a sculpture, in the same sense as if you were to take a slab of marble and sculpt a statue.”



Scott Baxendale, shaping a guitar neck.

It’s a delicate, elegant exercise, one that belies the serpentine gun- and drug-fueled path that led him here. Baxendale’s saga is one of sin and redemption, and it ends, he hopes, with Johnny Depp playing him in the movie.

Baxendale came of age with Rock & Roll. He dreamed of being a rock guitarist, but his parents were practical, telling him he needed something to fall back on if the music thing didn’t work out. Baxendale, still playing his guitar every day, went off to college like a dutiful son. During his freshman year, his mother sent him a newspaper article about Stuart Mossman, a luthier in Winfield, Kansas. Realizing that guitar making was that thing he could fall back on, Baxendale dropped out of college in 1974 to apprentice at Mossman’s side.

He was a quick study. Over the next decade, he became a minor legend among guitarists, and his work took him from Winfield to Kansas City, Nashville, and Dallas. He built or repaired guitars for a who's who of the music world, including Carl Perkins, Johnny Cash, Hank Williams Jr., Elvis Costello, Joe Walsh, Willie Nelson, John Mellencamp, and hundreds more. At one point, he was also curator for the guitar collections of the Grand Ole' Opry Museum and the Hard Rock Café chain, caring for such priceless gems as Jimi Hendrix's black Gibson Flying V, Elvis Presley's sunburst Gibson Super 400, Buddy Holly's 57 Strat, and one of John Lennon's Rickenbackers. He was at the pinnacle of his trade, partying with the stars and getting the VIP treatment at shows.

By 1986, Mossman wanted to retire, and Baxendale bought the company from his mentor and moved it to Dallas. But as the ink dried on the Mossman purchase agreement, things began to unravel, causing Baxendale's world to crumble in a drug-induced rock & roll flameout.

It began innocently enough: the Dallas Hard Rock Café hired him to build two giant guitar-shaped bars, one of them 34 feet long. Baxendale was already working long hours at the Mossman factory, which was cranking out 250 guitars per year. As well as directing the company's marketing, and managing the details that plague any businessman, Baxendale was hand building about 30 guitars per year. After working all day at Mossman, he would go to the Hard Rock to work on the bars.

"I could only work on the bar projects from about 10:00 at night until 6:00 in the morning," he says. "Then at 8:00 A.M. I had to go work at the guitar shop, usually not getting out of there until after 6:00 P.M. I was working these ridiculous shifts and I was working them seven days a week."

Cocaine was the recreational drug of the day, and for Baxendale it was a logical choice to help him get through that brutal schedule. "That was the beginning of my *dark days*," he says. The downward spiral began with him first snorting and then smoking cocaine. Eventually, his wife kicked him out of the house, and his family sold Mossman while there was still something of value left in the company. Baxendale finally checked himself into a voluntary drug-rehab program in Arkansas but admits, "When I got back I wasn't really ready to dive back into things. I was struggling to

stay sober. I would go to AA and do all right for three weeks. Then I'd go on a binge and start all over again”

By 1991, those binges landed Baxendale in a homeless shelter, where he met a character who introduced himself as Doug Hilton, saying he was a member of the famous hotel clan. His name was an alias, one of many, though it took Baxendale a while to discover this. Hilton was a serious yet charming alcoholic who “would start off each day with a bottle of Mad Dog 20/20 that he called his fruit juice, then proceed to whiskey and beer until evening, when he would drink a bottle of peppermint schnapps,” Baxendale says.

Baxendale was working hard, trying to get his act together again. He enrolled in the University of Texas at Arlington and managed to move from the shelter to a small apartment just off campus. He even began doing guitar repairs at a local music shop. One day, shortly after moving into his apartment,

Hilton showed up; the would-be hotel heir needed a place to crash. He kept telling Baxendale he was about to come into big money; once his windfall arrived, he planned to go to Belize and open a bar, and he wanted Baxendale help him get it up and running. “It sounded good, but I didn't really believe that he would ever get any money,” Baxendale says.



Scott Baxendale, checking out a customer's guitar.

“Then one day this FedEx guy shows up and gives him a check for \$55,000 dollars made out to Dean Roundy”—Hilton's real name—and, “That was when the adventure truly began.”

The “adventure” was equal parts *Fear and Loathing* and *Bonnie and Clyde*. It would lead Baxendale on a multi-state crime spree fueled by crack cocaine and the settlement money his new best friend, Dean Roundy (the alias Hilton's real name),

received following his father's death. Their crime-spree started when the two did a cross-country jaunt in a rented Lincoln Continental, loaded with an arsenal in the trunk that would "freak out a SWAT team." Their first run-in with the police happened in rural Texas, where they went target shooting with their new guns. It just so happened they were trespassing. The cop let them go after they paid the ranch owner \$1,500.00 for "destroying" his fence, which was already just a series of broken wire they moved out of the way when they drove through. They had several more close calls with law enforcement in Texas, Utah, and Nevada throughout the summer and fall of 1991, but the close calls came to an end on January 24<sup>th</sup>, 1992 when Baxendale, Roundy, and Denver resident, Kevin Rutherford, were arrested for Felony Three Aggravated Robbery on East Colfax.

Baxendale and Roundy met Rutherford at a Colfax bar when they first rolled into Denver, several days before their arrest. Rutherford said he could 'lead them to crack heads just waiting to be robbed.' The night before their arrest, the trio broke into two apartments. "At the first apartment, they had one little chunk of crack and no money," Baxendale says. "Then we went to another apartment but instead of crack dealers it turned out that it was a family of immigrants—people just trying to make a living for their family. They were all crammed into this little apartment, so we didn't get anything that time."

The night of the 24<sup>th</sup>, they went out again. "We went into this apartment and there was some crack-head hooker-type chick sitting on the couch. We looked at her and said 'get the hell out of here.' She went across the street and called 911," Baxendale says with a bit of a chuckle and a shake of his head. "We came out of the apartment and there were cops waiting for us."

Baxendale faced nineteen counts—one for each person who had been present in the three apartments during the robberies—and enough to possibly put him behind bars for life under Colorado's sentencing laws. "I went in [to Denver's then Deputy District Attorney, Roy Podboy] and said, 'I am addicted to cocaine; I will do anything to get off these drugs and to fix my life'

Podboy believed him, offering Baxendale a ten-year plea deal that could have still resulted in prison. At his sentencing hearing, Baxendale showed remorse, and



potential: he explained to Denver District Judge John Coughlin that in the months since his arrest he had been accepted to the Pier One residential drug treatment

program. He also supplied the judge with a file of information that included a newspaper article from the time when he purchased Mossman; it talked about the guitar tradition and the guitars Baxendale built.



Scott Baxendale and Haylar Garcia

“He read the whole article,” Baxendale says, “and when he was done reading that he said, ‘I will give you one chance at drug rehab, but just one chance. If you mess it up

you will go to prison, day-for-day to the end of the full ten-year sentence.’

The sentence included two years in residential treatment, and eight years of probation with routine drug testing. Baxendale returned to the luthier’s trade, first working for other music shops in Denver, and then setting up the Colfax Guitar Shop in 1998. He rediscovered his soul in the wood and glue of a guitar. Today, a new generation of artists, including the Vines and the Drive By Truckers, has fallen for the sound of a Baxendale “ax.” His future once again looks bright, even cinematic, so much so that when Baxendale shared tales of his checkered past with friend Haylar Garcia--a fellow musician and indie film developer from Denver--Garcia helped Baxendale co-write an autobiographical screenplay called, *Narcophonic: The Ballad of Bad Bax*.

Brainstorming about who should play the lead, Garcia and Baxendale kept coming back to Johnny Depp. If Depp were to sign on, the team could surely secure funds to do the project right and get a favorable distribution deal: he has cachet with the film-industry powers, and is a formidable guitarist with a Rock & Roll flair all his own.

“Johnny had a reputation for doing some small indie stuff, so we thought ‘he’s the perfect guy’, but then Pirates [of the Caribbean] hit big, and suddenly he’s a \$20 million per picture multi-mega star,” Garcia says. “We said, ‘lets try and get it to him anyway; lets see what happens if we search him out with no funding, no contacts, no nothing.’”

They assumed sending a script to a major star via his agent would be like sending it to a black hole; no one would look at it. So, how could they get it to the elusive Mr. Depp? A scheme emerged: Baxendale would build a guitar just for Johnny (with a chamber to house the script), and he, Garcia, and a cadre of pals would set out on a mission to make contact with Johnny—filming the whole process for an indie documentary dubbed *Do It For Johnny*. They created a website that featured the guitar, kept updating it as their exploits continued, and gathered intelligence on Depp’s whereabouts from fans around the world.

After nearly a year, and ten thousand miles crisscrossing the country in an effort to get the guitar into Depp’s hands, they finally made contact with him in August of 2006, when he was in Aspen for Hunter Thompson’s blast off. Holding the guitar up for Depp to see in the bar of the Hotel Jerome, they began to explain the whole convoluted story, but before they could get it out, Depp said, he knew of the guitar but couldn’t accept it with a script inside due to legal issues.

Baxendale didn’t hesitate. First and foremost a musician and luthier, he removed the script from the guitar, and handed it to Johnny. Depp accepted the guitar, and told Baxendale to send the script to his agent.

Garcia and Baxendale are still pursuing their dream. “We are talking to Johnny’s people, and getting good vibes from them, though he hasn’t read the script yet,” Baxendale says. In the meantime, *Do It For Johnny* is finished, with footage of the team handing the guitar off to Depp, and the team got to see their movie make its world premier at the Majestic Marjorie Luke Theatre during the 22<sup>nd</sup> Santa Barbara International Film Festival film-festival on January 28<sup>th</sup>. Baxendale’s future really does look bright.

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