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Gretsch Model 40 Hawaiian Short-Lived Flat-top

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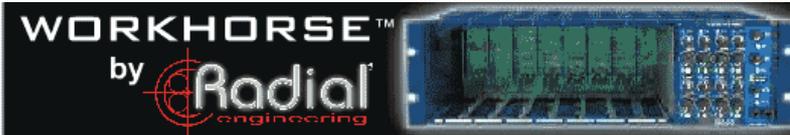
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Gretsch Model 40 Hawaiian Short-Lived Flat-top



By ERIC C. SHOAF



The Hawaiian guitar style came to the American mainland during the Pan Pacific Exposition of 1915. And while the popularity of Hawaiian music and playing faded in the '40s, the effects of the movement continued to be felt. Students of the guitar often learned the Hawaiian style first, that is by laying the guitar flat on the lap, tuning the strings to an open chord, and moving a metal bar up and down the strings to make the sliding, flowing, melodic sounds associated with luaus, palm trees, leis, and pineapples – although with students just starting out it wasn't usually quite so melodic!

Still, this was an easy way to get into playing the guitar and when found today, these early student instruments often still bear fretboard markings from 1 to 12, either as factory originals or thoughtfully inked into place by a helpful teacher to assist in navigating the strings up to the octave at the 12th fret.

Our featured Gretsch Model 40 Hawaiian is not a student model and represents a departure from the guitar one expects with the Gretsch logo. But as did most manufacturers, Gretsch understood the impact of popular Hawaiian music on instrument sales, and sought to fill a market need. To complement its line of archtops in the late '30s, the company produced two Hawaiian acoustics similar to competitor's offerings. The Model 40, which cost \$40 in 1930, is a professional model based on a standard guitar-shaped body with round soundhole, big neck, heavier bracing, a straight bridge saddle, and flush frets in the common style.

The body is constructed of mahogany with a spruce top, and measures 16" across the lower bout. The Gretsch is well-built, with the neck meeting the body at the 12th fret, and the large pickguard seems almost ornamental rather than functional. The rest of the body ornamentation is spartan except for the peghead. Banners carrying the "Gretsch Hawaiian" logos are pearl inlaid into a silver overlay. A matching pearl flower is contrasted with colorful tuner buttons. The package is nicely balanced. But none of the Gretsch acoustic Hawaiian instruments were good sellers and were long since relegated to obsolescence when the Hawaiian music craze was over.

However, the influence of the lapsteel guitar cannot be understated. For thousands of youngsters, a lapsteel was their first exposure to the joys of making music because it was simpler to play than a regular guitar and provided a nice starting point to the world of stringed instruments. Guitar manufacturers were able to profit from the sale of thousands of lapsteels, money that could be reinvested in research and development of new guitar designs.

Lapsteels are popular among collectors today for many reasons, chiefly the "cool factor" associated with any period artifacts. For this Gretsch, add rarity to the mix. The company's line of acoustic Hawaiians was not terribly successful, and this was the first Gretsch flat-top guitar offered. Gretsch also marketed an interesting electric solidbody Hawaiian in the late '30s, but that's another story...

Photo: Michael Tamborrino

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