



RKS Design Inc. photos

Reporting on sound, design and materials

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RKS open-architecture guitar swaps PU for cellulotics

By Robert Grace
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Ravi K. Sawhney is strumming a new tune. The founder and chief executive officer of RKS Design Inc., a Los Angeles-area industrial design firm, remains an ardent believer in plastics. But he's gone old-school when it comes to materials for the body shells on his company's new-wave electric guitars.

Sister company RKS Guitars, of which Sawhney also is CEO, recently switched to cellulotics from cast polyurethane on the award-winning line of open-architecture guitars that RKS has developed over the past few years in conjunction with partner and veteran rocker Dave Mason. The move to using Eastman Chemical Co.'s Tenite cellulose acetate propionate resin — made from softwood materials — has result-

ed in guitars with a richer tone.

The resulting sound is "fatter and more distinctive," according to Sawhney. After the change to Tenite, a 76-year-old Eastman brand, he said, "It was amazing to hear the difference ... to see the leap and bounce on that material and what it did to the tonality."

RKS had been using outside contractors to cast the PU bodies, first using silicone and then epoxy tools. Then Eastman made its pitch.

Sawhney was speaking at a design conference in 2004, where he met Gaylon White, head of design industry programs at Kingsport, Tenn. -



White

based Eastman.

White and a colleague took Sawhney aside and asked if he had ever considered using the wood-pulp-based Tenite for the body shells. "Of course, he hadn't," White said in a recent telephone interview. But Sawhney was very receptive, which led to Eastman supplying RKS with blocks of sample resin.

Things on both sides went at glacial speed, and "we limped along," White said. But they gained pace after the Eastman representatives buttonholed Sawhney and Mason after the Hall of Fame guitarist played a rooftop gig a year ago at the national conference of the Industrial Designers Society of America in Pasadena, Calif.

Mason, a founding member of the British rock group Traffic and former member of Fleetwood Mac, was interested to learn

more about how cellulotics might affect the guitars' sound quality.

Molded samples and further testing led the parties to realize that Tenite shells truly made a difference. So



RKS decided to change paths. It commissioned some injection molding tools be built in Shenzhen, China, by a toolmaker with which RKS has had a lengthy alliance. The unidentified Chinese company began injection molding the first versions of the redesigned guitars about three months ago. But that is a temporary arrangement, Sawhney said recently.

RKS in June moved into a new, 12,130-square-foot headquarters facility in Oxnard, Calif., which also houses a 10,900-square-foot factory space. The design firm plans to pull its molds back from China, and place them with local injection molders to make the shells. RKS, meanwhile, will do all prototyping, hand assembly and finishing on the products. The facility turned out its first production models July 1. Sawhney said they are producing just two guitars a day there now, but plan to ramp up to 20 per day by year's end.

"We're also starting tools for new models," he said, noting his firm's plans to create a new series of electric guitars using cellulosic shells.

Vice President Paul Janowski is busy staffing up for production. RKS Guitars has 12 employees now and anticipates having 20 by year's end.

The initial Tenite-bodied models include two hollow-body instruments — the translucent Ruby Red and charcoal-hued Dark Star — both of which RKS is starting to inventory for off-the-shelf sales, as well as the solid-body, bright-yellow Sunburst. Ruby Red costs \$3,000 and Dark Star \$2,000. Then the firm also has its made-to-order Pop Series, currently featuring Pink Lipstick, Orange You Glad, and Fine Lime models that each cost \$4,000 because they require more-extensive hand finishing. RKS plans to launch five more cellulosic-bodied models and colors soon, including the chrome-plated Chrome Molly.

The RKS guitars won a pair of silver hon-

ors in this year's 1,380-entry IDEA design awards sponsored by IDSA and *BusinessWeek*. The neon-green Fine Lime guitar graced *BusinessWeek's* July 4 cover, as a poster child for what the magazine called "creative destruction," highlighting how "design can shake up conventional product categories and carve out entirely new ones."

"We started with polyurethane," Sawhney explained, "and it was a great interim solution. But production capacity and scalability were limited."

In addition to Tenite's tonal advantage, he notes that RKS also redesigned some



parts to integrate details that injection molding allowed.

Unrelated to the material

change, the company also contoured the traditionally flat back of the instrument to allow it to nest more naturally against the player. One musician noted: "It's shaped like a woman's torso and fits nicely against your body." This new feature, said Sawhney, "was driven by designers, looking for better ergonomics." The result, he claims, is that the user has better dexterity, since he or she can focus less on balancing the guitar.

One beta-tester is none other than Gaylon White's son, Rory, singer and lead guitarist for the Murfreesboro, Tenn.-based band, Copacabana. Asked to offer his views after playing one of RKS' new guitars, he said of the tone:

"It can be real throaty and it can be real

pristine, too. It's got a nice warm, fat, jazzy sound ... and a chicken-picken' sound," too. Paying the instrument perhaps the ultimate compliment, Rory White said: "It sounds like a Telecaster, and it rocks like a Telly."

This sound versatility is reflected in the range of musicians that Sawhney says are using his guitars.

These range from indie rockers Slightly Stoopid to heavy-metal gothic band Grayscale to country legend Glen Campbell. He also claims that "a number of Grammy-winning artists are using our guitars in the studio," but they cannot discuss it since many are publicly paid to promote other guitar brands.

RKS Design, meanwhile, is not limiting its vision when it comes to using cellulosics. Sawhney said the firm already has designed a new line of trendy, patented, folding reading glasses — called Optigami — that use Tenite not only for the frames but also for the lenses.

"We're waiting for the first articles," Sawhney said on Aug. 10. "We've got orders all over the country."