

Pierre Fontaine

The man worth 250,000 guitars. The figure is huge, a measure of the strength of work deployed by this artisan during close to a half century of activity to make most of the entry level instruments of the French market of the worldwide 'guitarmania' born in the 1950s.

Retrace the path of a man as solid as ebony and as reactive as spruce.

In the '20s a whole new generation of artisans of wood installed themselves en masse in Paris, freshly arrived from Italy, mostly from Sicily. These men were fleeing a black misery for some, and black shirts (fascists) for others. They were carpenters, cabinet makers and luthiers and mostly from Catania (Sicily) traditional home of luthiery.

It is Mirecourt in Vosges where apart from bowed instruments, guitars, mandolins and banjos were produced in quantity. Soon this migratory flow unexpectedly both redraws the map of instrument manufacture in France and changes the future of a skill usually passed on from one generation to the next.

So from the '20s to the '90s some of the names that became famous; Jacobacci, Di Mauro, Busato, Bucolo, Pappalardo, Castelluccia, Favino and that of Maccaferri (for the Selmer company) were heard in the popular music of the day played by simple effective instruments from the lower-priced range, and more rarely from the expensive, top quality instruments.

One important name missing from this selective list is that of luthier Pierre Fontaine. This maker was an inescapable figure in the history of French luthiery of the second half of the twentieth century, first of all he was the only French one of this group of workers of Italian origin based in Paris, Then he forged in the business the more steadfast reputation of overall champion of the entry-level range of guitars of which he produced at least two-thirds, and this in an era when the methods for mass production did not exist do; finally, he is the last survivor – 'the Last of the Mohicans' he liked to joke, of this period when everything was handmade.

It was in Picardy that Pierre Fontaine started his career. Born in 1933 at Sailly-Flibercourt in the Bay of the Somme, he played from the age of twelve in the local dances and weddings at the side of his father Fernand. Pierre learned the basics, his father played trumpet and violin and the orchestra included a saxophone and he took to the drums making a jazz dance band. His father made him a large drum from aluminium to which he added a skin painted with a Pierrot clown and a banner announcing 'Pierrot Jazz'. His father worked hard – he had a hairdressing shop in the village, a farm, and was also a metal polisher. He frequently went to Paris to buy supplies for his business and his talents as a metal worker led him to know Bortolo Busato with who he became friends. Fernand Fontaine made polished banjo rings and quality metal fittings. During the war the two men helped each other, adding to this economy of barter food products from his farm. In 1943 on one of these visits Pierre met for the first time Bortolo Busato at his new workshop at the cité Griset in the 11th arrondissement.

In 1950 the Fontaine family moved to the Ivry suburb of Paris, the Somme area offering no real future. They first set up a small food shop, and then moved two years later to Champigny-sur-Marne in the Val-de-Marne. This move was motivated by Busato having installed his family in a second factory in the town. Pierre Fontaine started work first for Busato at his Paris workshop. As well as a morning job working in a metal shop he learned his trade at the side of his father at the Busato premises making banjo rings. He had another job in the evening too. Pierre soon learned that work was not an easy ride, there was no 35 hour week, and the future smiled on courageous men.

At the same time in the Moroccan quarter at Champigny-sur-Marne – entirely populated by Italians – the father and son began making moulds for classical guitar bodies, and the bodies themselves, in their basement, all for the insatiable Busato who taught them also to repair accordions for the local market. It was at this time that Busato noted that Pierre was faring rather well. One thing is certain, Pierre much preferred working with wood than metal and was proving to be a hard worker. In 1955, when he started working in the Marne factory, Madame Busato remarked that since the young Pierre was there they had never made so many guitars. In this factory apart from making ornately decorated mandolins and some Hawaiian guitars, he made all the classical guitar bodies for Busato. These were fairly plain instruments mostly destined for 'l'Academie de Guitare de Paris' in the passage Verdeau in the 9th arrondissement and for which Bortolo Busato made the tops in the Parisian workshop. Pierre remembers that it was quite common for customers to come to the workshop to check if the tops were fine enough in the eternal quest for more power and tone, and did not hesitate to grind them further to their taste, often to the point of cracking them beyond repair. At the same time he also remembers the special order guitars made for Georges Brassens that already had some of the characteristics of the later Brassens model offered by Jacques Favino.

The jazz models made in the post-war period and the '50s were no longer made by Bortolo Busato himself but in large part by Pierre Calza, an Italian born in 1900 who had learned his trade with the piano maker Gaveau before joining Busato in Paris and then at Champigny.

With the encouragement and the blessing of his employer Pierre Fontaine set up on his own in September 1957 at rue Pierre-Marie Derrien still in Champigny-sur-Marne in the metal polishers quarter where his father was already established polishing the hubcaps for Renault Dauphine cars. Pierre worked to make guitars, in small runs of a dozen at a time, for various shops who bought from him direct and added their own names and labels. One of these clients was none other than Bortolo Busato, incapable himself of supplying a market that was becoming so hungry for guitars at the dawn of the '60s. The money started to flow, word of mouth spread, his reputation was established, the market strengthened. Soon another of his clients originally from Catania (Sicily) and based on the rue Keller in Paris, Pierre Bucolo, entered his workshop at the cry of "Pierre Fontaine, champion of the world!" conscious of the generous will and efficiency of his sub-contractor. It is a time where the recognition of his peers is something as difficult to obtain as a glance in the workshop of a colleague; the want of compliment and the trade secrets are more than ever the two things feeding lutherie, the quality know-how is jealously protected because it is synonymous with livelihood. Pierre Fontaine intrigues his rivals because he is the only French in this landscape of a lutherie exclusively held by the Italians.

Little by little the Pierre Fontaine workshop became busier, recruiting first from his family; his father Fernand for sure, then his mother, his wife who had trained in haute-couture with Maggy Rouff, then his brother, and later his son Alain and an apprentice came to close the ranks.

From 06-45 to 19-00 with an hour for lunch this little group made twenty guitars a day which necessitated no less than three French polishers working full time. These varnishers were, as it should be, Italian. Among them, Sauro Callegaro known as 'Roro' originally from Gênes started in 1963 at 29 years of age and would work with Pierre Fontaine until the age of 75, that is 46 years of good and loyal service. He made false teeth in Italy before joining his uncle in Bobigny making sheds and then low price dining furniture before joining Pierre Fontaine. Like his boss, who found in him an alter ego, they were both men who could do anything from the hard work to the finer detail, whether guitars, plumbing or masonry. The pace of work fixed at six and a half days from seven, the workshop supplied from 400 to 500 guitars a month for 160 music shops all around France.

On Saturday Pierre delivered in person to the retailers in the Paris region aboard his Citroën Ami 8 Break (1) in which only the driver's seat remained with a roof raised a metre and filled with instruments. The rest of the week's production was destined for the provinces and sent from the station at Joinville-le-pont. The big clients, such as Paul Beuscher who kept stock at a warehouse at Chennevières not far from Champigny, came and collected their merchandise with a removal truck; big problems need big answers.

Another, not negligible, clientele of Pierre Fontaine were the showmen who bought low cost guitars in their hundreds, sometimes even better quality instruments that had some faults (seconds?). These cheap guitars were for giveaway prizes at the fairs and were of classical form fitted with steel strings, a beech neck, brass frets, a moulded back and three braces under the top, often finished in sunburst. When the electric guitar became popular in the 1960s Pierre Fontaine would produce all that the Fête des Loges (2) would give away, an electrified plank with coloured pearloid sides. The cost of making such an electric guitar allowed them to make good profit margins; three times the cost, of which today one can only dream. At this time it was less work for Pierre than an acoustic guitar and a financial windfall generating hundreds of thousands of francs only paid for by the mountains of five franc notes or buckets of small change from the showmen such as owner of the trucks and attractions Samy Fort; known as 'Big Samuel'. In the middle of the '60s the guitar had become the chicken that laid the golden egg. To make a living and do well one only had to make thousands of guitars. But by taste and convenience the most of the production did not dwell on the electric and remained focused on the folk, classical, 12 string and Hawaiian guitars and a jazz model like a Selmer copy.

One has to remember that in France more guitars were sold than cars in the '60s. The height of this guitarmania was reached in 1968. From the start of events of February and March guitars were not selling (3) but Pierre Fontaine did not stop working and continued to make 400 to 500 guitars a month even while he could not sell any. He had in stock therefore 2,000 by October when normal economic conditions returned. In December he sold his entire stock to Paul Beuscher who soon found they were short of stock in the days leading up to Christmas; the Parisian shop broke all records in selling more than 800 guitars a day, all brands included, before the 25th December! The clients formed a queue at the counter where the sales staff, in an agitation worthy of Jacques Tati (4), sold an instrument often without accessories or even tuning, the guitarmania also caused traffic jams. Pierre himself remembers even selling a guitar from his car to another driver at a red traffic light; it turned out he was a butcher who, from his delivery truck had noticed the guitars in Pierre's Citroën DS station wagon (bought from Busato, the Ami 8 being too small to carry the prosperity of rock 'n' roll). The sale was the most outlandish of his career!

So, two thirds of young French guitarists of this era had without doubt taken up arms with a Pierre Fontaine guitar. He was amused to see here and there, in the city or country, young men from all horizons holding one of his creations. His name still did not appear in his guitars. On certain models he himself applied the logos supplied by Paul Beuscher or also those of Camurat, his two most important clients.(5) It wasn't until 1980 with the opening of his own shop Rome Instruments at 54 rue de Rome, Paris, that he could finally assert his own work with his own name. It was also at this period, well before the revival of luthiery in the 'Manouche' style, he provided the dream of a Selmer Maccaferri copy, a guitar for which the manufacture is very demanding and with which it is, according to his own opinion, hard to make a living. Of those who played professionally on the powerful, good sounding and reliable Fontaine Selmer copy, one recalls the excellent Gypsy musician Raphaël Fays who for a long time got the best of its tone, le Manouche Moreno, virtuoso guitarist with famously powerful hands, the upcoming and talented Phillippe 'Doudou' Cuillierier and Max Robin within the 'Fernando Jazz Gang'.

If Pierre Fontaine had decided to take the step from manufacture to selling direct it was out of necessity. In the mid '70s the director of Paul Beuscher invited Pierre to his office to negotiate a few more francs off the price for guitars in such large quantities. The Japanese marketing had taken over and started to limit the competition, until now loyal, with merchandise growing aesthetically in quality but using bottom of the range materials. The Paul Beuscher made the logical but debatable choice for the best price, but the lack of profit was worrying for Pierre Fontaine who thus decided to take the chance on selling his production himself. The Japanese Pierre knew very well as they had recently visited his workshop at Champigny-sur-Marne to 'take the pulse' of the French mass-produced instrument market. They certainly were not disappointed in their trip. These, who were already at full speed in the industrialised mechanical mass production market were full of admiration in front of this little Frenchman asking the how and why of this 'Stakhanoviste'(6) of the six strings who was able to turn out so many instruments from his workshop without any logical production method made from bits and pieces and managed from his old house (a varnishing spray cabinet was installed in the dining room, a stock of veneer was kept in his young son Alain's bedroom). Even today, if one compares, of equal quality, Fontaine's workshop with a certain high calibre Spanish factory equipped with machine tools a hundred employees make on average 50,000 guitars a year compared to Pierre Fontaine's average production of 4,500 to 6,000 from six people during the forty years of full production, that is not far from 250,000 instruments! In Paris, the factories of Pappalardo, Anastasio and Di Mauro had supplied a lot, but even those three still less than Fontaine.

To take account of the colossal work that represents, one has to count that for a long time Fernand Fontaine made, on his own, twenty guitar necks a day, only anybody who tried to carry this out would appreciate the speed. Pierre Fontaine had to, in turn, sub-contract some jobs as he did in the past with the pickups for his electric guitars made by a taxi driver friend, also for the neck blanks, without the openings for the tuners, or the heel, from a carpenter on the corner. Still, a small group. He had to renew stocks of his wood quickly and of good quality from timber merchants of Paris and Montreuil. He took delivery of planks of mahogany so big and heavy that it took six people to lift, one day he bought no less than two tonnes of attractive Macassar ebony and Brazilian rosewood in frightening quantity. So, it was not unusual to find on one of his mid-range guitars of the '70s until 1986 species of wood which would make contemporary luthiers of the highest quality green with envy. In the matter of woods for luthiery, what was ordinary then is luxurious today.

Concerning tooling and fittings, one key person to the business, and one of the men held in high esteem by Pierre Fontaine was Jean-Pierre Delaruelle (1937-2008). Respected and appreciated by the whole profession for his drive and personality, his sense of service and his friendship, he took over the old company of Moser in the Vosges region specialising in the production of quality fittings. The energy of this simple worker who became an 'engineer without diploma', the strength of his curiosity and work, of this innate mechanic, this incarnation of the French 'System D' (7) was in perfect accord with that of Pierre Fontaine who thanked him for adding value to his workshop where the atmosphere remained bathed in his spirit. The memory of the man who would deposit a twenty-five kilo package of tuners on the pavement in front of the workshop at five in the morning brought from Pierre Fontaine an inexhaustible supply of anecdotes, each one funnier than the last. But above all, they obviously shared a 'joie de vivre' at work that seemed to belong in the past: "It was a good era, we really worked a lot, but it was a good ambiance, you had to have two lives in those days, one to work, and one for the good times! There were many things to be done in both...."

Until 1985 he continued working as self-employed, then with the shop 'Rome Instruments' created in 1980 and managed by his son Alain, his name became part of a S.A.R.L. (8). In the area around the rue de Rome where there were many retailers of stringed instruments, the young business innovated among the small shops like Piano Magne, les Editions Eschig, La Flûte de Pan, and even Vincent Genod and Camurat in making the biggest general store of its kind in the neighbourhood.

An idea that would make some envious, Rome Instruments sold everything – except pianos – from a Celtic harp to a double bass, from an accordion to a helicon (tuba), from a violin to a balalaika and for sure the guitars of Pierre Fontaine. In 1992 in reply to a demand for rental instruments they opened a subsidiary Aloca Lutherie. The Champigny-sur-Marne workshop officially closed in 1996 only producing 100 guitars a month made by Pierre and two helpers. In 2011 he came to make his last few jazz model guitars just for pleasure. The shutters of the workshop were finally pulled down.

We haven't mentioned here the Pierre Fontaine carpenter, cabinet maker, maker and fitter of windows, of bar counters, of road signs for a driving school, sub-contractor of bathroom fittings, and varnisher of wooden toilet seats. This man has lived five lives of work in one. Today he regards his journey with the feeling of having done as well as he could at work. At nearly 80, he enjoys an active retirement, one couldn't do it again.....

Starting as a musician, the 'Last of the Mohicans' of the luthiers of the great era has retired to the other side of the stage, he still enjoys the bal musette and the tea dances around the Val-de-Marne where he is known as the 'White Wolf'. He reports that now the musicians are often replaced by machines, and reminisces about the days when, a little musician at a 'bal' could earn as much in a night as a worker earned in a week. We have said nothing about his humanity, his simplicity, his warm personality and also his own unique professional qualities, the respect of the people who have worked alongside him, and of those who still manage to meet him, and that also, Pierre Fontaine is a world champion. Hats off Pierrot !

Translated by Chris Martin from a French feature in Vintage Vertigo by Arnaud Legrand.

1 = Citroën Ami 8 Break was the station wagon version of the small sedan based on the standard 2CV mechanical parts.

2 = Fête des Loges is a giant fairground in the St Germain forest west of Paris established in the middle ages that still operates for a few weeks in the summer.

3 - I think it refers to the student protests resulting in the riots of May that year which had a devastating effect on all of France.

4 – French comedy star of popular films: Mon Oncle, Monsiuer Hulot's Holiday, Playtime and more.

5 – Jacques Camurat sold guitars made by Fontaine and Xavier Grizzo among others, from his shop at 49 rue de Rome, Paris

6 – Stakhanoviste, from the Soviet propaganda term for someone who is willing to work hard and for long hours at his job.

7 – System D in French is a shorthand term that refers to a manner of responding to challenges that requires one to have the ability to think fast: from Wikipedia.

8 – S.A.R.L. Société Anonyme à Responsabilité Limitée, meaning a French limited liability company.

History of Pierre Fontaine and Rome Instruments

1956

It was at Champigny that Pierre Fontaine set up his workshop. In forty years more than 150,000 guitars were made by hand. A large part of production being destined for children, one could say that tens of thousands of beginners made their first arpeggios on a Fontaine guitar.

1980

Pierre decided to diversify his activities and opened at 54 rue de Rome a music store named Rome Instruments which quickly became a meeting place for guitar fans of all genres. Classic, Flamenco, Jazz, Folk, interspersed permanently for the pleasure of the customers. A part of the stock is devoted to the guitar of 'type Manouche', new or used.

1992

Alain Fontaine, who is now managing the company, decides to open a second establishment at 58, rue de Rome under the name 'ALOCA Lutherie'. It is devoted to the instruments of the Quartet (violin, cello, viola and bass) new or old.

The luthiery workshop of lutherie serves the two stores. The after-sales service, a major concern of Alain Fontaine, is there to ensure each client a total guarantee on the purchase of each instrument. Finally, two years ago, the sales service of strings by mail order, 'CORDILICO' ensures the daily shipment of any type of strings, and this, with a simple phone call.

Translated by Chris Martin from the website at ; <http://www.romeinstruments.fr/historique.php>