

Deep Purple changed everything

As a boy, Yusuke Kawakami despised his father's work as a guitar maker — the endless hours, dirty hands and stern obsessiveness of it all. But then one day a certain Ritchie Blackmore ordered one of his father's guitars, and the world was never quite the same after that

BY STEVE BERRY STAFF REPORTER

As a young boy, Yusuke Kawakami sat at his father's feet and watched as he hand-crafted some of the world's finest guitars.

He hated it.

Like most youngsters, Kawakami wanted to be outside, running, playing, going on family outings.

He resented his father and his stern, unsmiling ways; his working-class clothes and his calloused, dirty hands; his constant work and worry over his guitars.

Kawakami envied his friends and their fathers who took vacations, wore white shirts and ties and spent weekends with their families, playing with their children.

"My father was always working, even Saturdays and Sundays," says Kawakami.

"I don't remember him ever playing with me. No time. His hands were always dirty. I never saw my father in a good suit.

"I thought this guy had such a boring life, always working, even on weekends."

Kawakami could almost be describing himself.

Today, following the same techniques his father taught him, the North Vancouver ukulele and guitar maker works 12-hour days, works weekends, and is thinking that in a few years, his two-year-old son will be ready to take his place by his side in the shop, joining him in his "conversation with wood."

"I want to do like my father did — bring my son here," he says, a kind of sad yet proud smile on his face.

"Maybe he will hate me."

A wandering but seemingly fated journey took the 33-year-old Kawakami from watching his father work in the K. Yairia Guitar factory in his hometown of Kani City in Gifu Prefecture, Japan, to his own Majesty Guitars shop in a warehouse district off Burrard Inlet.

There was always a pull, something in the blood. His grandfather started the guitar factory during the Second World War. His uncle, a luthier in his own right, runs the business, and his father, Hideho Kawakami, was the company's master craftsman.

But the young Kawakami never dreamed that he would one day be a noted luthier.

"I was never interested in his work, but I always remembered the smells of the exotic woods and the lacquer," he says in accented English.

A turning point came when the teenaged Kawakami was in thrall to rock groups like Deep Purple and the Grateful Dead.

"One day, my father made a guitar for my hero, Ritchie Blackmore of Deep Purple. It was unbelievable!" says the ebullient Kawakami, his face lighting up at the memory.

His father would come back from trade shows in Tokyo with the autographs of rock stars.

"My thinking started to get off centre," says Kawakami. "I started to respect my father. I lost respect for white-collar workers."

Kawakami started making small items in the shop from scrap wood but, still, the urge to create did not surface with the kind of ferocity that would come later.

Instead, it was off to university and a degree in "nothing, economics" and a job as a "salaryman" in a stationery company 200 kilometres away.

"I realized very soon that this was not my job," says Kawakami. "My boss was the same age as my father but he did not look happy. It was as if he was just working for the money. I thought that when I get to be that guy's age I don't want to be like him."

On a trip home he visited his father — on the weekend — in the guitar factory.

As he opened the door it hit him.

"I woke up," he says. "I knew this was my job."

At the age of 22, Kawakami started his training at the hands of his father. But for more than a year he kept his job as a salaryman, catching the midnight train home on Fridays to work all weekend at his new craft.

His father insisted he learn from the ground up, sharpening chisels, picking up basic techniques and making small items — traditional wooden shoes, pencil boxes, wooden cases.

But both his father and uncle said he could not work permanently at the factory because other workers who had travelled from across Japan would be jealous.

"For you, it is too easy," they told him.

Instead, his father set up a tiny, 300-square-foot workshop in the family's garage for Kawakami to work in, crafting hand-built, high-end ukuleles that his father was too busy to make.

With the passion to learn burning deep in him, Kawakami came to Vancouver for a three-month trip to visit luthiers, especially those at the Larrivee Guitar factory.

"I knew that Vancouver had lots of wood," he says. A visit to Vancouver Island was like visiting a "candy house."

On his return home, he found himself working at an ice cream factory at night and making ukuleles during the day, finally making enough money off the instruments to become a full-time builder.

"I didn't do anything else, just making ukuleles, but I was happy," he says.

One day, a friend brought a young woman who wanted to buy a ukulele to the shop. She became Kawakami's wife.

"We never went to the movies or anything," he recalls. "She came with me when I had to buy tools or paint. Those were our dates." Kawakami was making five ukuleles a month, working 14 hours a day, and buyers loved them — but gave the credit to his father.

"Your father always makes nice ukuleles," he remembers store owners saying.

He decided he had to establish his own name and, with the help of Jean Larrivee, he and his wife Yuko came to Canada as landed immigrants in June 2002.

He soon set up his own shop in Marpole, starting from scratch — finding wood suppliers, building the instruments, marketing them.

"It was hard," he says. "I started to think of my grandfather, he started from nothing. I can experience close to what my grandfather did."

Now he's made more than 150 ukuleles, which sell for \$1,500 to \$3,500 each. And he's started making custom-made guitars which start at \$3,000.

He feels the same stress his father did when building the instruments, worried always that things will not go well. Like his father, he uses only the finest solid woods.

Making instruments "is a mystery," he says. "I always worry until I string it up and play it. And then I worry again until I hear from the customer."

Customers rave at his work. Vancouver resident Ralph Shaw performs and sells ukulele teaching DVDs and plays a Kawakami. "His ukuleles have a very full sound for such small instruments," says Shaw, known as the "King of the Ukulele." Local jazz singer Virginia Ise plays a soprano ukulele that Kawakami designed especially for her, his 137th. She describes it as having "a delicate waistline and gentle curves." It's named the "Hummingbird" to match her voice.

"He's brilliant," she says. "He's very much in tune with figuring out the personality of the performer and reflecting that in the work he does."

And Daniel Fujikake, owner of a Honolulu music shop that sells Kawakami's products, says, "Yusuke's ukuleles are some of the finest made anywhere."

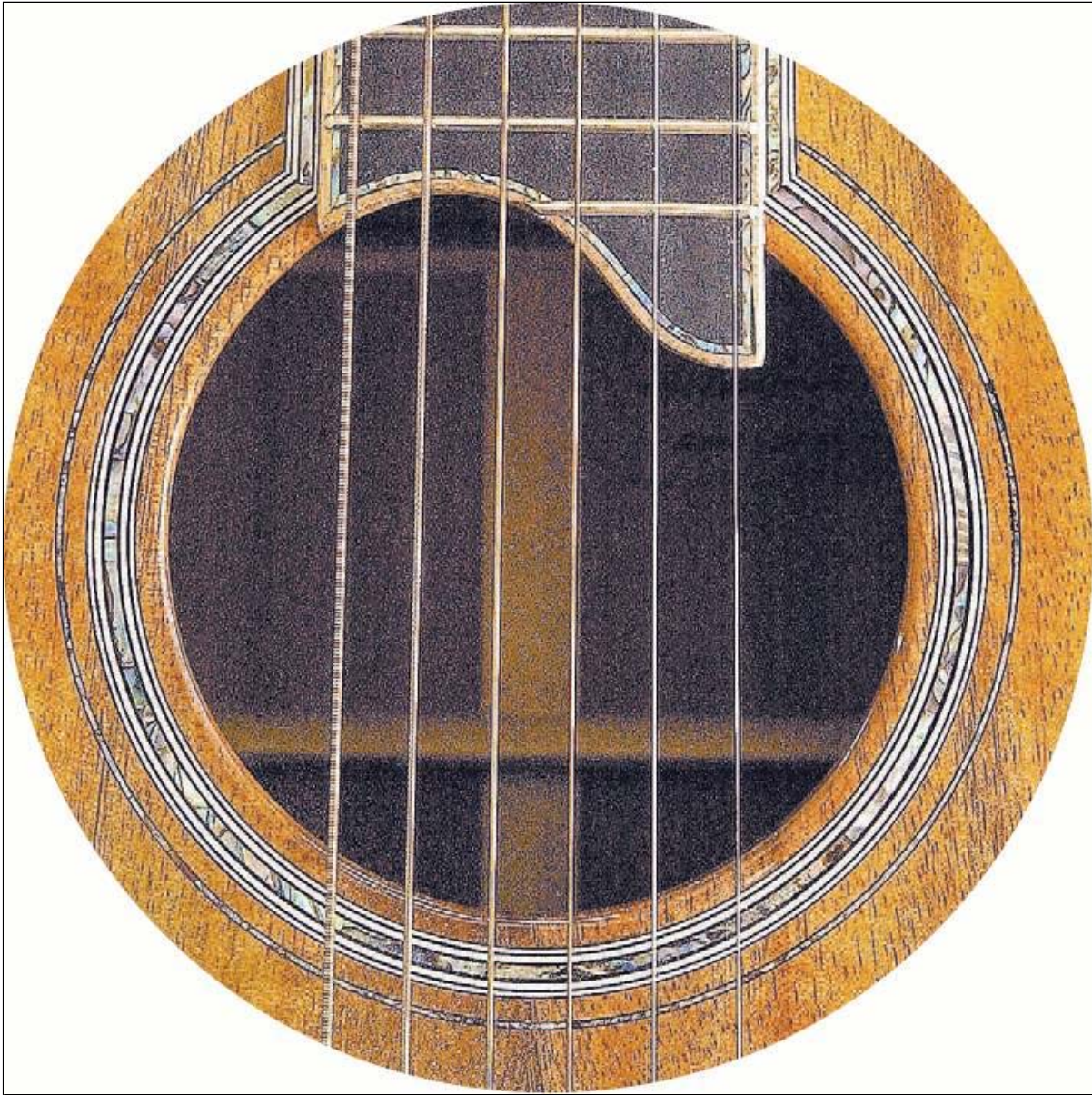
But like his father, the young man is always slightly dissatisfied with the results.

"My father is 65 and every year he is getting better," says Kawakami, who still telephones his dad when he runs into a problem on an instrument.

There is deep respect and reverence when he says: "He always has an answer."

To this day his father has never complimented him on his work. But Kawakami has been told that his father always inspects his son's work when he comes across it at trade shows or stores.

"Someone told me that when he was holding my ukulele he was smiling," says Kawakami.
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The sound hole of a Yusuke Kawakami guitar. One client praises his ability to bring out the personality of the performer in an instrument. WAYNE LEIDENFROST — THE PROVINCE



Ukeleles and guitars are Yusuke Kawakami's specialty. He is seen (at right, top to bottom) carving a new guitar neck, chiselling a groove inside the sound box and using heat and water to bend the outer edge of a guitar. PHOTOS BY WAYNE LEIDENFROST — THE PROVINCE

