

Chris Capozzoli – *Interview conducted at Cappozoli Woodworking in Sugar Grove, NC by Willard Watson.*

Q1 – Who are you, When and where were you born?

I am Chris Capozzoli and I was born in Charlotte, NC in 1980.

Q2 – What did your parents do for a living? Did you contribute to the family income or help parents in their work in any way?

My dad worked in radio, he started out as a disc jockey and moved up to sales, wrote commercials and dealt with selling airtime. My mom worked for Belk's store services, like the Belk Headquarters, they're Charlotte based, she worked on computers. I did not contribute to the income; I took away from it. (Laughs)

Q3 – What do you do for a living?

I build custom stringed instruments and custom furniture for a living.

Q4 – How long have to worked there?

I've been doing it for myself since 2010 to going on seven years and I did it for another company for close to 11 years prior to that. So just about 20 years' experience wood working.

Q5 – How'd you get into wood working?

I always had something I wanted to make and had like primitive tools in my dad's garage, and I discovered one of my neighbors had a wood shop, so I would go over there and bug him as a

kid. Get him to cut some wood for me so I could put a project together. You know, building a desk, some shelves for my bedroom, or a downhill like little boxcar kinda thing, treehouses, the typical childhood things.

Then I discovered another neighbor had a little shed out back where he was building guitars, and that totally fascinated me. And he leant me some literature and I would go over there and kinda stand behind him and watch him and bug him, until it got to the point where I was like, "I want to build my own guitar! I gotta do this." So as a senior in high school there was an exit project, had to cover all the subjects, I decided that'd be a good thing to do so I built my first crude, far from what I do now, guitar.

Q6 – How much older where your neighbors?

My first neighbor that had just a general wood shop where he made arts and crafts he was retired, he was probably 65 or 70. He and his wife did that together, she made stained glass and he would make tables or frames for the stained glass and Christmas gifts. The neighbor that built guitars he was probably in his 40s it was his hobby. He didn't build any to sell. A lot of people in the neighborhood worked for Phillip Morris in Charlotte and he was one of those guys. He worked second or third shift and in the daytime he'd be home building guitars and I'd go over there, take some notes and read some books that he had about it.

Q7 – How would you say the work has changed since you started?

Well techniques, I've learned more techniques, it gets a little easier the more you know. Quality continuously always gets better, that's something I hold high standards to is quality. The company that I worked for, for about 11 years was all about high quality. Work would come in the door because of the reputation of good quality. So work hard at work worth doing and do a good job while you're doing it. So that definitely set the precedence for, I've gotta do good work and I'd be embarrassed if I wasn't, I guess, that's what I want to do and people will talk about it and come back for more if you do a good job.

Q8 – Describe a typical work day

Typical work day starts out with a cup of coffee. Turn on the shop, get the lights warmed up and look at my notes. Review my notes from the day before, I always make notes in the morning and in the evening. Checklist, every day is a new checklist, so I go over the checklist, make a plan, I try to start with something simple in the morning to get warmed up, get my brain going and get into more difficult tasks throughout the day. It could be anywhere from sanding all day, milling lumber all day. Every once in a while someone brings in a broken chair, I'm glad to help out in the community. I usually do those things for nothing. That's always a, I don't want to call in an interruption, but it's part of the day as well.

I rarely take lunch breaks, and if I do I'm standing there drawing something and eating something with the other hand. There's always cleanup, I try to keep my shop super clean. So usually about three or four times a day I'm air puffing the dust around getting it out of my way. When I'm getting to a point where I need to glue something up I like to clean up the shop again just to make sure there no dust in the way. So that's one typical day.

Q9 – What type of people do you work with?

I work solely by myself, every once in a while I'll hire a friend to come in and do some "mill rite" type work, another word for grunt work, like sanding or milling wood, putting wood through the planer. It helps me get the day done a little faster. My custom wood working clients are typically second home owners around here, country club goers, Linville Ridge, Grandfather Country Club, Elk River, Hound Ears, those types of places where folks typically have their second home. It's usually new homes that they're building and I'm working mostly directly with the contractors and they're hiring me to do custom work for them, custom entry ways, vanities, mantles, a little bit of cabinetry here and there, and then once the house is complete and I've developed a relationship with the owner through the contractor, a lot of times they come back to me on their own and get me to do the final touches, like free standing furniture, tables typically, a lot of dining room tables. They see everything else I do and they're like, we want you to do us a table, (Laughs) coffee tables, dining room tables, hall tables, they're all of fun to do, and they're real artistic. I get a lot of freedom in that.

And my instruments, for the instrument world and guitar world, so far because its, I don't want to say it's a watered down business, but it's the golden age of guitar building. There's a lot of builders out there, so there's a lot of competition, there's a lot of people making guitars for less than what I'm selling them for, and there's a lot of variances in qualities. So far a lot of my clientele from instruments have been local friends and friends of friends. I have a few guys in Nashville that have bought a couple guitars from me, but mostly its local buddies who

want an instrument, or their family, so that's the clientele I'm really getting for guitars right now.

Q10 – When do you work? time? (day/night) (weekdays/weekends)

Well, in the self-employed world we have this kind of ongoing joke that when you work for yourself you only work half days, but the glory about that is you get to choose which 12 hours of the day that is! (Laughs) I do my best work from early in the morning, I'm up at six in the morning and I do homework I call it, business online stuff, internet work, answering calls.

I try to get to the shop by about 8 a.m. and get working. I'm most productive at the shop from 8 a.m. 'til about 2 o'clock. Then it slows down because I've used a lot of my energy, but I'll stay 12 hours, I'll be in here from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. sometimes. It's anywhere from a 9 or 10-hour day to a 12 to 14-hour day. Depending on the call and demand for what I'm working on. If I promise a deadline I'm not going to miss it so I'm gonna stay in the shop and burn the midnight oil until its done.

Q11 – What do you do with downtime at work?

There's not a whole lot of downtime here, if I just glue something up and I have wait an hour, hour and a half to take it out of the clamps there's always something else waiting in line. I do a little bit of instrument repair, I'm choosy about it because it takes up a lot of time and I don't make as much money doing it, but I do it for favors for friends. And I like to get ahold of special instruments, vintage, cool instruments that I don't get to see that often. It's fun it's a learning

process, I get to work on something different. So if I do have a little bit of downtime I'll grab one of those instruments I need to repair and get it done real quick, and get back to business.

Q12 – Does your occupation have any special sayings or expressions? What are they? How did they come about?

We definitely say behind you all the time because you know you're walking up and I've got a shop partner, Paul and we are always making sure that we aren't going to run into each other, you know safety first. We have a lot of sayings that are kind of in, Silver Lining, our previous employer, and we'll say some of his sayings just because we worked for him for 11 years and it's just something that has come over here from the old shop.

One saying that only a couple people would get is THX, and this is in reference to, it's kind of a nerdy thing, it's the end of one of George Lucas's first films, THX 1138 it's this cool futuristic film he did in film school. And at the very end of the film the guy who's tryna get away, gets away because the people chasing him determine that it's over budget to continue chasing him. So if I'm working on something and it's taking too long I shout out, "Lets THX this one!" because it's over budget, and only Paul and I will get that one. (Laughs)

Q13 – What special knowledge, skills, and abilities are needed? What techniques and methods?

Woodworking skills for one. Organization skills, little bit of business skills, public relations type stuff too we're communicating verbally with clients, drawing skills, drafting skills, you have to be able to create the piece you are about to build on paper first and being able to communicate

and convey that to your client and get them interested in it and have them believe in you to be able to get your point across in the manner to where they are going to trust you will do an awesome job and give them a sweet piece of furniture or a guitar.

Q14 – What are things about your work outsiders would not expect?

Well when people come into the shop the first thing they say is “*Maaaaan*, this is a clean shop. Never seen such a clean shop! Do you do work in here?” (Laughs) That’s one of the biggest things that happens when a newcomer comes into my shop, they are like “Wow!” blown away by the organization and lack of clutter. I’ve been in some shops where it’s like a collage of stuff, “What are you working on? What’s that?” It’s interesting to go see these people, I don’t want to get into trouble for saying this but it’s typically older people, like I know a lot of people that are seniors in the business and you go into their shop and it’s an eclectic collage of things that they’ve done. Jigs, fixtures, projects, chairs that have piled up that people bring them to fix that they don’t get around to yet. I try to avoid all of that, keep it flowing through, keep it all clean and fresh. The only thing you see is either the piece I’m working on or the piece I just finished.

Q15 – What were originally the most difficult aspect or your job?

When I decided to go out on my own, I was ready, I had collected most of all the tools that I needed and stored them away in my kitchen in my apartment. I just gave up basically the front half of my apartment to store these tools until the day came. One of the difficult things was just to relax and trust that there was going to be work. Basically a mental challenge. Even if I don’t

have something to do, go in there and build something, just being in there making the shop happen, keeping the doors open and then get a phone call and do their project and finish it and as I'm sweeping up the phone would ring again. Just trusting, that was probably the most difficult part was just trusting that there was going to be work. Jumping off a bridge basically from the safety of another woodshop where I had steady income. But it's worth giving that up to be your own boss and my creativity went up like 1,000%. I work on my own schedule, if I needed to go somewhere, not if I wanted to, but if I have to go somewhere I am able to without worry. I'm a one-man shop so if I'm not in there cutting some wood and making something nothings getting done but I still have the ability, you know, if I've got to go to the doctor's office or something or if I've got a meeting I can just run out and do that. I like that part of it.

Q16 – What is/was the most satisfying?

Being able to create something from start to finish is one of them. Daydreaming about a project, going to bed thinking about it, bringing it to paper, making templates and making jigs and fixtures for it and then actually building the piece and having it done is so satisfying. But then second half of it is the satisfaction I get from the client's reaction and their pleasure. I get to see the piece for a day or a week and then it's gone forever, I can take pictures and look back and put that in my portfolio, but I don't get to live with the piece. The clients who are super pleased and happy have an heirloom now they get to live with for the rest of their life and pass it on, that's the second half of the pleasure.

Q17 – What advice would you give someone beginning this line of work?

Don't take any short cuts, if it takes you longer than expected and you are going to make less money, do it anyways because the end result is going to show how much time you put into it. The quality in the end product is what is going to keep work coming in.

Q18 – Describe a memorable moment from work.

Selling a guitar to Darrell Scott, a Nashville musician. That was a highlight of my guitar building business. It was something I sought after, it was a plan, and I executed it and it happened and it was awesome. I got to hang out with him, meet him, play a little music with him, he gave me a shout out on stage. He's touring with the Zac Brown Band right now, he sent me an email "Just want to let you know, this is my number one guitar on tour." I was like, "Yes!" that was super exciting, that was like "Man, I'm dorking out right now, thanks a lot!" Cheese balling it.

I came up with a new design, I guess you could call it, and instantly the first person I thought of was Darrell Scott, so I sent him an email, with a picture of the guitar and introduced myself and told him who I was and what I was up to, and no response. About six-months later I had made the second one, which was like completely left field from the right one, similar style. He emailed me back, and he was like "You got my attention now, tell me about this thing." "Well I built this thing with you in mind. I'd love to get it in your hands I know you're playing in Hickory soon." He was like "Oh bring it! I'll put you on the guest list, come to the sound check we'll hang out, we'll check it out." And that's all he did was play that for the whole sound check, he played like every single note on the fingerboard over and over again and like teasing all his songs. It was awesome. He was like, "Do you mind if I play this for the show?" That's the goal,

for someone you really look up to in your field, in the music world, likes your work enough to want one. That's definitely a working highlight for me.

Q19 – Do you know why people want so many tables from you?

Well they get done with the house and some of them have interior decorators who are like helping plan this out, your gonna need curtains or your gonna need something to fill this space. Everyone's got a dining room and most of these people aren't taking the furniture out of their old house and putting it in their new house. This is their second or third home so they are getting all new stuff to go with this freshly designed house and they want something that's created for them, for that space and since I'm already in line with them since I'm the wood worker who did this other stuff for them they're like, well I guess you could build our dining room table. They often ask me to do chairs for them too, but I don't do chairs. It's a whole different story, you gotta make eight or ten of them, and you gotta have all these jigs because everything is compound angles and stuff. Yeah, but building tables is fun, I just did a couple of them and sent them down to Asheville for a guy who built a house and the wood came from that property which is super cool. All the trees that came down got milled and he's building a barn out of it and a lot mantel pieces from some of it.

Q20 – Where do you typically get your materials from?

I prefer a lot of my materials to come from reclaimed sources but it is getting super expensive. Just old barns from around here that get torn down or old wood that is inside of a barn. I

always kept getting all this walnut that people were advertising, old walnut, stacks of it, and I'd talk to them about it, where was this wood, they were like oh well we bought this property, and there was a barn and the old wood was in the loft of the barn. And that kept happening. And I wanted to find out why this is, and it even made sense, when someone bought some property, they cut down timbers, they built a house out of some of it, they built a barn out of it. The quality hardwoods that you like to make furniture out of like the walnut, cherry, and some maple, got stored in the barn for the future with intentions of building furniture out of for the house. A lot of times it never got used for 50 to 100 years until someone else buys the property and they are like we are going to clear out this barn or we are going to tear this barn down and I end up getting the barn wood and the wood inside of it. It's an old story, happens all the time.

FSC certified woods I prefer; all the wood sources I get that are new lumber is all Forest Stewardship Council certified. I call it blood wood, if it came from a rain forest and it doesn't have papers, I typically don't want it. Because, who died? Or what tribe did you kick out of the forest to clear cut these trees down for your palm plantations, so conscious type things, stewardship type things I like to keep up with.

And in the guitar world the smallest piece of wood is just so expensive, and it's come from around the world its crossed many hands and every time it crosses another set of hands the price goes up, but at the same time to have that wood and build a guitar out of it I want to know that it is some righteous wood and not blood wood per say, I want to know that it was cut down responsibly, select cut, go in the woods, pick that one tree, cut it down, haul it out with horses, elephants, or whatever it takes, but not clear cut, it just makes me feel better at the end of the day. Even though I'm a woodworker and I'm using this resource, that resource is

getting chopped down fast and the new stuff that's growing isn't even being left there for 100 years to get big again it gets cut down before it can even mature, for whatever reason, like development, that's an oxymoron, development. (laughs)

Q21 – When you say papers for a wood, for a tree, what do you mean?

That proves it was cut down responsibly from the time it was cut down the person that cuts it or the company that cuts it, they say who they are, where it was cut down, the fact it was done legally and they pass it on to the next person and those papers have to follow all the way down the line, to the sawmill. There is a huge thing in the instrument world with rosewoods and ebonies all around the world, that like Gibson a few years back got busted with a gigantic, like freight container after freight container jam packed full of either Madagascar ebony, one of those two, that was completely illegal. There were no papers on it, the FBI busted them, took it all into custody. I don't know what became of it, but I surely hope that it gets used and not stored in some warehouse in vain. It got cut down, charges were pressed, but at least distribute that stuff out, its already been cut you can't put it back.

There's SITES this international situation for wood, like this huge list of endangered woods that you're not allowed to import or export without strict papers, rosewood January 1 2017, every species of rosewood, some 300 species got put on it. Which makes it nearly impossible for me to ship a guitar to another country. You basically have to have strict documentation of where that rosewood came from. Even musicians travelling around the world with their guitar, they have to have an identity for their guitar that shows these are the woods

on the guitar, this guitar lives in America, it's going to visit, you know it's like it's got to have its own passport essentially. We're going to visit this country and I'm bringing it back with me, I have zero intent to sell it. They are pretty strict with it and so many people in the guitar world are like "Oh, exotic woods, exotic woods!" And they are awesome and all but there are lots of native woods that sound awesome that you can build guitars out of. Build them here, sell them here, and they're legal to ship anywhere else in the world, local hardwoods. I just built my last electric was 100% North Carolina woods and more than half of it was reclaimed, it was walnut, northern ash – baseball bat, hard ash - and white oak.

Q22 – Do you have a favorite wood to work with?

Walnut definitely, it's one of North America's only dark woods. It's beautiful, its dark brown, it's got great tone for instruments. I got a lot of it, I hoard it. The walnut trees take forever to get big. You see them in the forest and they are just super tall and skinny, unless you get in some virgin forest woods, they are all just super small. Any of the walnut you buy today it is harder to get anything wider than six or eight inches without sapwood on it, which is the whiter wood on the outside edges of the annual rings. I get it when I can, I look on Craigslist ads and stuff and try to find people who are selling it, those barn finds are awesome.

Old growth is a tighter grain, instrument builders in particular want old growth wood because the climate was colder, the trees were growing slower, especially in the mountains, you can have the same species of tree growing down in Charlotte and the annual rings are going to be fatter just because the hotter climate. But in general global warming is causing

trees to grow faster so the annual rings are farther apart. There's a million debates about whether or not it's a lower quality. I've seen guitars made out of wood that has really fat annual rings and it sounds great. In my opinion, those are just opinions strictly. (Laughs)

It's all in the listening ear, what you like, my shop partner and I have this debate all the time, "Why don't you use this for a top?" Well there's certain restrictions that apply to a point, he was like, "That's all just the listener." Well that's true, I agree to most of that, but there are still like certain boundaries that you have to work with, like you can't use maple for an acoustic guitar top or you wouldn't get any sound out of it, it's a hard stiff wood, you need somethings that soft that can pump essentially. Spruce and cedar are two of the most common guitar woods for acoustic tops, because its stiff but it's still soft so it can withstand the tension of 140 pounds of pull from guitar steel strings over time and its soft enough to pump the energy from the strings into the guitar to create sound.

Q23 – Are there any restrictions for the type of wood you would use to build electric guitars?

In my opinion no. You can make an electric guitar out of anything. It does affect the tone, a harder wood is going to give you a brighter tone, a softer wood is gonna give you a warmer tone. A mix of the two will give you a nice blend, but there's a million opinions about that too.

In my humble opinion and in my experience of building, you can make an electric guitar out of whatever you want. That's part of why I like making electric guitars, aside from acoustics. You have so much freedom to do whatever you want with it. Like poplar, woods that people would snub their nose up to are some of the greater woods to build with. Low-end guitars have

been made out of poplar for 100 years or more. It's a different species but in Europe acoustic instruments are made out of a European poplar. They've been making upright basses, acoustic basses, in Europe with this stuff for hundreds of years. I don't know exactly what species it compares to; it is a little different than the American Poplar.