



■ Simpson-James SJ-5 Custom.



■ Spalt Matrix.

SIMPSON-JAMES

"I started to build basses in 1971," says Christopher Simpson Mowatt. "It was one of those things where you experiment and see what happens. I learned a lot, made as many mistakes as one can make, and slowly refined my approach."

Mowatt dropped out of building for a while—he runs a repair service, Guitar-Tech, in Westfield, Massachusetts—but his interest was rekindled when he hooked up with Robert James Clarke in 1992. They began to design and build custom instruments branded with their middle names. "The first Simpson-James bass was a fretless 4-string that I built for myself," says Mowatt. "That lasted until I took it down to a local shop to fit it for a case, and the 'oohs and aahs' got the best of me." The design was altered in 1994 when Mowatt acquired a unique piece of body wood. "A friend gave me some maple from an old dining table built in the mid 1800s. There was a hole where the leg bolts came through, forcing me to change the shape of the bout—and the new SJ-5 Custom was born."

The next step was designing a production bass that could compete in the mid-price range. "That's when I came up with the Performer Series of bolt-on basses," says Chris. "I wanted to create a flexible bass that was solid, lightweight, and playable." The Performer is traditional in many respects, including its alder body, maple neck, single Basslines MM pickup, and 34" scale length. But it's got some interesting wrinkles, too. The body has been trimmed down to keep the bass light (about 7½ pounds). Three alternate capacitors are supplied, so the tonal response can be user-tweaked. The neck has a radiused edge where it meets the fingerboard, for better playability. And that maple or rosewood 'board sports frets of two different widths: .105" up to the 12th fret and .085" from 13 to 21. Mowatt says this provides better intonation—and it also makes upper-register playing easier. Production numbers have been modest because of Mowatt's busy repair business, but a few Simpson-James basses were still being made in 2002.

SMITH: SEE KEN SMITH

SPALT

It's not a bass—it's a modular bass system. The futuristic low-frequency instrument created by Michael Spalt has an aluminum "mounting platform," to which various pickups, electronics, bridges, body extensions, and wooden necks can be attached. He came up with the idea in 2000, after experimenting with modular guitars. "They weren't accepted in today's vintage-dominated market," says Michael, "but they had a beautiful, clear, low-range sound, so I decided to build a bass prototype. It took off from there."

The Spalt line includes the 34"-scale Matrix 4-string and Terminator 5-string, both with bodies and headstocks of chromed or black-anodized aluminum. The Matrix's neck is made of maple or goncalo; on the Terminator, it's wenge or bubinga. Fingerboards are cocobolo. The body extensions feature various exotic woods, including wenge, padauk, and zebrawood. Pickups and electronics come from EMG or Bartolini. Even closer to the cutting edge is the Magma, a 4- or 5-string equipped with the LightWave optical-pickup system. "With the LightWave, you can detune to 8Hz and still get great usable tone," says Michael, "if your amp can handle it."