

NEWS

Meet Yuri Landman, Maker of Awesome Guitars for Sonic Youth, Liars, Blonde Redhead, Lightning Bolt



Lee Ranaldo's Moodlander guitar
All photos by Marius de Ruiter

Guitarists like Lee Ranaldo of Sonic Youth, Aaron Hemphill of Liars, and Brian Gibson of Lightning Bolt are known for the deluges of sound that they wring from their instruments-- drones, fuzz, wails, rumbles, alarms, shrieks, and sometimes even actual notes and chords. But don't be surprised if these innovators' riffs become even more face-melting soon, as they've got some new weapons in their arsenals: the creations of Dutch craftsman **Yuri Landman**.

On **his website**, the 34-year-old Landman describes himself as a "luthier specialized in experimental electric string-instruments". He builds some of the craziest, coolest guitars (and guitar-like things) we've ever seen. So far, he's built a guitar called the Moonlander for Lee Ranaldo and one called the Moodswinger for Aaron Hemphill. (You can hear the Moodswinger on the song "Leather Prowler" from the new Liars album.) He's currently working on instruments for Brian Gibson, Amadeo Pace of Blonde Redhead, and Jad Fair of Half Japanese.

Writer Marinus de Ruiter caught up with Landman at his Amsterdam studio, and chatted with him about his work. de Ruiter also took all of the photos, so you can drool over them as you please. If you happen to be in Amsterdam this weekend, Landman's work will be on display at the **Output Festival**. As part of the festival, Landman will give a talk tomorrow about "third bridging, overtone series, and traditional musical scales."

Consider our minds officially blown.



Yuri Landman and his collection

Marinus de Ruiter: You built guitars for Lee Ranaldo of Sonic Youth and Aaron Hemphill of Liars. Why did you specifically contact these musicians?

Yuri Landman: I contacted Sonic Youth and Liars because I'm a fan of these bands. I'm a musician myself and I have always operated in the same vein as them. Especially Sonic Youth. My ideas about how guitars should sound and how they should be built is based on their work. They modify their guitars by using different stringings and tunings. They often work with string clusters pitched in the same note to create a chorus-like tone. And they change the sound of the strings by putting screwdrivers or drum sticks between them.

They perfected this technique on traditional electric guitars, but I saw that that was quite difficult to achieve. Traditional guitars often are not sufficient for these prepared playing techniques. My approach was to build an instrument that suited their approach. I wanted to make something that allowed them to elaborate on their style.

Aaron of Liars is heavily influenced by Sonic Youth. He has a similar technique and he immediately grasped what I was doing with my instruments. The guitar I built for Aaron, the Moodswinger, has that similar bell-like sound that you often hear on Sonic Youth's records. It's a kind of zither, which means that you basically play open strings for each note.



Aaron Hemphill's Moodswinger

Marinus de Ruiter: How did you get in touch with Aaron and Lee?

Yuri Landman: I approached Aaron at a Liars gig in Utrecht and I e-mailed Sonic Youth. When I finished Aaron's guitar, the Moodswinger, I hooked up with Lee Ranaldo backstage at the State X New Forms festival in The Hague. He played the guitar and he liked it, but he wanted something different. He asked me if I could build him an electric version of the harp guitar. A harp guitar has, in addition to the guitar neck, a so-called "harp field," an array of open strings that resonate with the tones that you're playing.

I handed the first guitar to Aaron just before the recording of their current album and I set upon working on the second one, the Moonlander, which would be Lee's guitar. This guitar sounds really big, like you're playing in a cathedral. I finished the Moonlander in time for the Dutch festival Lowlands, where I presented the guitar to Lee backstage. Thurston played it too and immediately asked me if I could build them more guitars. I don't know yet what they want exactly, we're still deliberating about that. I think Thurston wants a cross between the Moodswinger and the Moonlander.

Marinus de Ruiter: What materials do you use to create your instruments?

Yuri Landman: Over the course of 10 years I have built guitars out of basically deadwood and old electronic parts. Meranti wood, found in window frames, doors, and some furniture, is a favorite. My first guitar was made out of a table leg. Aside from used guitars I collect parts from audio equipment, old printers, and other electronic gear. I've made several prototypes that lead to what I'm doing now. For my new guitars I use quality components, though. After all, especially with Sonic Youth, my instruments have to compete with their top-of-the-line guitar collection.

I used to play in bands and experiment with the sounds of my self-made guitars. It was born out of naïveté. With a naïve approach, you're basically trying to create new sounds by experimenting. Gradually, I ended up with certain systems that turned out to be based on a century-old theory. My vision of sound turns out to be related to the Aliquot stringing theory. This is a piano-building technique from around 1890, where additional floating string banks are resonating with the strings that are played. How these extra strings are tuned determines the timbre of the instrument. Basically, I'm coupling a 100-year-old theory with the possibilities of today.



Prototype for Brian Gibson's guitar

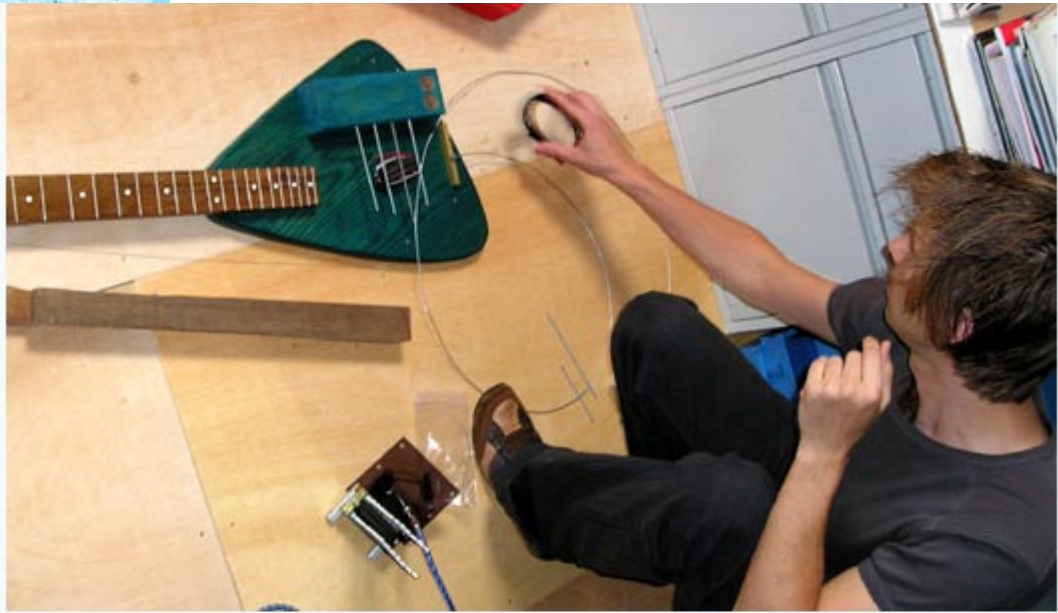
Marinus de Ruiter: When I saw your instruments, I immediately associated them with John Cage's prepared pianos.

Yuri Landman: Of course, the prepared pianos of John Cage were tremendously influential on people like Fred Frith, Glenn Branca, John Cale of the Velvet Underground, and Sonic Youth. By placing metal objects on strings Cage created unforeseen, atonal effects. I've worked like this for over 10 years, but what bothered me is that you can't play simple tunes like "Frère Jacques" or whatever on these prepared instruments. And of course it's great to discover new, crazy sounds, but at a certain point it's also practical to reproduce these sounds when you're playing live. I want my instruments to be able to create pure tones. They can be a little deviant, but they have to be recognizable in the end. That is why I started creating twelve-stringed instruments, like the Moodswinger, so that you can at least play every note from the twelve-note scale.

Marinus de Ruiter: The neck of the Moodswinger indicates a scale that is different from the one found on ordinary electric guitars. Why is that?

Yuri Landman: It's a natural thing. All around the world you find this same principle applied to string instruments that are hundreds of years old. The Turkish saz, the Indian sitar, and the Japanese koto are all based on the natural principle of how a scale works. In the Middle Ages the European churches called it 'reine stimmung', which is the same as 'just intonation'. After all these experiments with screwdrivers, metal rods, and string banks, I eventually arrived at the same scale that has existed for ages. This is a natural overtone scale that is in our system and that birds use when whistling. It is related to mathematical principles from nature. All music from every part of the world is based on this scale.

The logarithmic scale that you find on classical pianos and guitars only deviates slightly from that natural scale, which allows you to easily switch between various keys. That is why the neck of the Moodswinger indicates different scales, so you can find harmonics of the natural scale and standard guitar notes on the same instrument.



Yuri assembling Jad Fair's guitar

Marinus de Ruiten: Can you tell me about the instruments that you are working on now?

Yuri Landman: Currently I'm working on a guitar for Jad Fair. It's basically a two-string guitar with a built-in thumb piano. The strings of the guitar can be bent by a brake cable from a moped, which is connected to a foot pedal. When amplified, the thumb piano, which is mounted to the guitar body, has a very low and impressive sound, almost like a vibraphone.

I have two other assignments right now. Brian Gibson of Lightning Bolt has ordered a combination of a bass and a guitar, a stereo guitar-bass hybrid which will have a built-in thumb piano as well. It's going to be one evil, aggressive-looking axe, based on the model of a Gibson Flying V. The thumb piano will be in line with the guitar strings.

For Amadeo Pace of Blonde Redhead I'm working on an electrical harp. He suggested a harp, because he liked my work, but didn't feel the need to adjust his basic way of guitar playing. Also, his grandmother used to play classical harp and he liked the idea of going back to that sound. His instrument will be based on a prototype I did years ago, which is basically a big triangle with strings, of which you can adjust the timbre by sliding a steel rod through them, the basic principle that is also applied in the Moodswinger. Instead of the way the prototype is built, the strings will be mounted on an open frame.

Marinus de Ruiten: What is your goal with these instruments?

Yuri Landman: On these instruments you're able to discover all kinds of new techniques, things that haven't been done yet. I like that. My point of departure when I design something is often one fundamental idea, based on an existing string instrument, but as it turns out the new creation can be a platform for new sonic ideas or even concepts for new instruments.

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