

My Quest for a Taylor

by Jeremy dePrisco

January 17, 2004 - the weekend before I contracted a serious case of laryngitis, I went on a quest to three music stores to play, and perhaps purchase, a new Taylor. I had been thinking about getting a higher-quality instrument for a little while, but hadn't decided on when I was going to do it. After listening to my recordings, and considering the type of instruments I've been playing (mostly cheap laminates with the exception of my Ovation), I decided it was time to make the leap to a professional quality, solid wood instrument. I knew I wanted a Taylor because I had played them in stores years ago while living in Harrisburg. I had done a good bit of reading on guitars, mostly in Acoustic Guitar (which I've subscribed to for almost 10 years). Based on everything I knew, a Taylor was the right one guitar, mainly because of their necks and the woods they use.

◆ Robert Sides ◆

So I started out at 10:00 AM and went to Robert Sides, a local chain that has a store in Williamsport, which is about an hour NW from Bloomsburg. I called them first to see what they had in stock, and I was given the impression they had a fair number of instruments to try, and some were 10% off.

Now, Robert Sides is one of those places that I occasionally shop, or browse, but would prefer not to do business with, so I knew I was probably just going to play some guitars and make a purchase elsewhere, not necessarily in the same day. Robert Sides is usually overpriced, and their staff doesn't know jack shit. I once rented a string bass from them, and their main string instrument person was a horn player, not a string player. He didn't know anything about the construction of the instrument, and he tried to sell me a cello bow.

Sides specializes in band instruments, and has contracts with many area schools. Back when I was in high school, Sides was where we got my flute. Last year I took my flute to get cleaned and repadded, and the quote for the work was \$300, about what the flute was worth new. I took it to a competing store, and not only did they advise me that it didn't need to be repadded, but they could do a cleaning for only \$40. Even the accounting dept and the receptionist at Sides suck. When one of the Bodo Band's benefactors (Ollie) was supposed to handle the payments on the bass we were renting while we were away, they screwed up when I requested they contact Ollie.

As far as guitars go, I did purchase my Alvarez at Sides years ago before they expanded their guitar department. But I only purchased the Alvarez because I needed to trade back an untunable classical guitar, which I bought from them. Almost none of their guitars were kept tuned, and I wonder now if the room they were in then was climate controlled. These days they do have a climate-

controlled room that is separated, and their selection of guitars is larger. Their sales people tend to be a bit too macho for my taste, but luckily I'm good at ignoring that.

So I get to Sides, and I see that they have about 10 Taylors. "Longhair" Chris hands me a 2001-2002 Taylor catalog and tells me to guard it with my life because it's his last one. All but possibly one Taylor (a nice 310, list \$1348, going for \$943 plus 10% off) were out of my price range. (My price range would later change.) The 310 was very good, no cutaway, which was a bit of a detractor. Immediately after picking it up though, I noticed I was in quality guitar country, so it probably would be a good buy. They also had a 22-fret 410ce (list \$2298, retail \$1608), which, oddly enough, I thought was "OK" but not great. I played a few other guitars including some non-Taylors, and was surprised with the range of quality.

I thought I'd be at Sides a couple hours, but there wasn't enough to keep me interested for long, so I decided to make a run to Harrisburg where I knew I would find a better selection. By that point I knew that the quest was going to take much longer, probably all day, and that I might – if I was doing that much traveling – come home with something.

Harrisburg is roughly 1.5 hours from Williamsport, but the drive can take longer with traffic. It just so happened that I was going to town the day of a Farm Show event, which usually means that traffic is tied up just about everywhere.

Harrisburg has several music stores, one of the things I enjoyed while living there. Hazleton had two music stores, and you knew where to go for what. We were typically loyal to C&C, where the sales people were less pushy. Harrisburg was a bit different. Of the places I purchased from (Wray's, Terrace, Mike's, Triple R), Wray's was always my favorite, but I tried the other places occasionally to see what they would have. Wray's always came through with the best service, and the people always knew their shit. So that's where I got a fair amount of my gear in Harrisburg. They also have consignment sales, which helped me get rid of a few pieces of gear I didn't need. Wray's is an authorized Taylor dealer, and that's where I first played them, so I knew I would probably end my journey there.

◆Guitar Center ◆

Since I lived there, a corporate store has been built called Guitar Center. It's a chain you have probably heard about, and I think they are affiliated with Musician's Friend. They have locations in all major cities. I went into one in Vegas once. They recently put a large store in one of the sprawling complexes where I used to commute every day. I was there once last year while visiting friends, purchasing mike cables, and I wasn't impressed with the staff. As an ASCAP member, I get a 5% discount there, so that is one of the only incentives for me to shop.

A week earlier I had emailed them to see what selection of Taylors they had in stock. I never received a response. I figured since I was in town, I would stop at Guitar Center before Wray's so I could increase my chances of playing more instruments, make some notes, and check prices.

They have a dedicated acoustic guitar room, and sections for all the other instruments and computer gear. When I got there (after what felt like forever due to lunch hour and Farm Show traffic), I went right to the acoustic guitar room. There was one other guy there playing a guitar, and it looked like I would have the place just about to myself. Their selection was decent, and they had the model that I had dreamed of (414ce for \$1689), but I wanted to see what my options were.

There was a 214, which I heard was well in my price range, but when I played it, I realized I needed to reconsider my budget. It was constructed well and would be a nice beginner guitar in the solid wood category, but it was just OK. I was looking for something that spoke to me. They had a 310ce cutaway (\$1329) that I noted as "OK", and a 310 that played consistently when compared to the one I played at Sides, except the price was \$969, which I already knew I could beat.

Just to make sure I wanted a Taylor, I played some other guitars, including some Martins and a Guild. I can not, and never could, stand Martins. I know they are one of the pioneers in the industry, and that they make, overall, a quality guitar, but I have never really played one that I liked.

A couple other people came into the room. The first guy had a Taylor that he wouldn't put down, and I later learned he was buying it. It was some type of limited edition (a 410 I think) that was going for less than cost, but I didn't get a chance to play it because the guy wouldn't let go of it. Macho guitar attendant dude and told me there wasn't another one in the store, but that I could get one shipped in from Maryland if I paid in advance. Yeah, like I'm going to pay for a guitar I haven't played...

While the acoustic room was nice, there were still problems with sound bleeding from the other areas of the store. You could still hear riffs of "Crazy Train" coming from the guitar section – can't people learn more songs to test out on guitars?? A noticeable thud from the drumming room didn't help the situation.

By then, more people came into the room. Mom's with their sons looking at guitars for the first time. Older guys looking for a second or third instrument, possibly collectors - teenagers who like a guitar because it is blue. I started to feel claustrophobic, and wanted to head out soon, but thought it would be good to check the price of the 414ce with Wray's (which was way out of my initial price range, but I didn't want to let go after seeing the last guitar fly out).

In the room was a small desk with a computer and phone. Without asking, I picked up the phone, dialed an outside line and called Wray's. I got Loren, whom I had received email from earlier about their selection, and told him where I was and what I was looking at.

While Loren put me on hold to check stock and pricing, a Guitar Center rep (who looked more like a Radio Shack geek) came into the acoustic room and looked at me funny. He stood there as if he was expecting me to move. Loren came back on the line and we talked a little more. I made sure to let Loren know I was serious about buying an instrument that day, and in turn made the Guitar Center guy get even more fired up. Loren said they didn't have the 414ce, but that they could get it and do better on the price. They also had a large selection to play. I told him I would be over soon. Of course the Guitar Center guy only heard my side of the conversation, so he didn't know what to think.

I wasn't going to screw around with haggling without checking some other sources. Guitar Center told me they had no more 414ce's, and they expected that one to fly out soon. That may have been true, but I didn't feel comfortable buying a guitar from a corporate chain like them.

◆ Wray's ◆

Wray's isn't actually in Harrisburg. It is in Lemoyne, which is just across the river outside of downtown Harrisburg. There's a couple ways to get there, but from where I was starting, I made the decision to go through downtown instead of taking the expressway. At least that gave me the chance to drive through what we affectionately called the "ghetto".

The thing about music stores, especially in Harrisburg, is that they are almost always located in a place that is hard to get to. Wray's is located a couple doors up from a major intersection and requires a left turn into traffic to get to their parking lot. Coming out of the parking lot, you need to make an almost blind right turn into traffic, or a deadly left turn into more traffic if you are feeling lucky.

Wray's is in the same block as another store, Triple R. My first experience with Triple R happened before I even got in the store in 1997. Back when we first moved to Harrisburg, I was job hunting at a temp agency in Lemoyne, across the street from Triple R. After my interview, I had some time to kill so I started across the street, not looking for a walk sign. Out of the corner of my eye, to my left, is a white bumper coming right for me. It's a cop, and he motions for me to get on the sidewalk. Ten minutes later I was standing there with a \$99 jay-walking ticket... on my birthday. The people in Triple R, seeing me get written up, probably thought I was a fugitive. So that's my run-in with the law.

Randy, from Triple R used to be one of the owners of Wray's. He split off after some disagreement, and they have been rivals ever since. Patrons of one place are typically not patrons of the other. Randy is a dead ringer for Ted Nugent and

just as obnoxious with or without a guitar in his hands. The only thing I bought there was a two-channel amp after trading in my old PA. The Taylor quest wasn't going to take me to Triple R, but I figured this was a nice tangent...

When I got to Wray's, I was greeted by Loren. After a brief stop at the rest room, we got down to business. By now the road-weariness had begun to set in and I was just glad to sit down. I had no lunch, just running on adrenaline in the spirit of the chase.

I was at Wray's there for at least two hours. They had the 310 that I played in Williamsport for about the same price. I played the following guitars and rated them with my own non-scientific scale from 1 to 10 and some other qualities:

310 Ltd Koa (\$958, list \$1598) – 8 – played twice
410ce Ltd Rosewood (\$1599, list \$2048) – 8.5 – played twice
312 CE (\$1099, list \$1868) – bassy/thin – no rating
310ce L4 Lid (\$1299, list \$1898) – 8.5
314ce (\$1299, list \$1938) – 8.5
314ce Ltd-1 Koa (\$1799, list \$2458 on sale for \$1648) – 8.5/9 – played 3 times

They had other models that were even further outside my price range. I made notes until I was satisfied that I knew what I was looking at.

Loren was well versed on the woods and construction of the instruments and gave me plenty of time on my own to play without distractions. It was clear that I was going to go outside of my price range. At that point I had invested a whole day and several hours of driving, so I knew I needed to make a decision and stick with it.

While looking at the guitars, Loren told me about a 12-string that he recently worked on. One of the strings was wound in the opposite direction. While changing the strings on a busy Saturday, instead of loosening the string, Loren was tightening it, and it snapped and smacked him in the face. The lady that brought the guitar in said it came strung like that from Guitar Center. So I was glad I didn't buy anything there.

The guitar that caught my eye, and played the best compared to all of the others, was the limited edition 314ce with Hawaiian Koa back and sides. It was one of the 2003 limited editions. Taylor used to offer a whole line of Koa instruments, but as Koa has become more precious, they offer it less and less. This instrument was comparable in quality to the 414ce, but actually listed a bit higher because of the Koa. It had somewhat less flashy appointments, but sounded and played great. (As I mentioned earlier, my "dream" Taylor was a 414ce, which Wray's didn't have in stock but they could order. But after playing so many, I realized that it was hard to go wrong with a Taylor.)

The 310 limited Koa was basically the same thing as the 314ce without a cutaway and electronics. It was the same price as the 310 from Williamsport, so it would have also been a good deal. After much debate, asking Loren to play so I could hear the difference from a listener's perspective and after requesting a calculator to making calculations about what I could afford, I sprang for the 314ce limited (see enclosed specs). The whole time, Loren was extremely patient, non-judgmental, and friendly. He also wisely recommended that I get a guitar humidifier, which I would later learn was a critical piece of advise.

The journey didn't exactly end there. I had been carrying my Washburn D-8 with me as a possible trade towards a new guitar. Both Sides and Wray's wouldn't give me any more than \$50 for it, so I figured I would just give it to Dad or keep it as a practice guitar (preferring the former rather than the latter because I had not room).

I was looking at another hour and a half on the road, more if I decided to cut through Harrisburg and go to Bloomsburg the back way. So I decided to head towards Hazleton instead where I could visit the family and recharge. That ride was one of the longest I've ever had. Rain and snow squalls increasing as I drove North on I-81. My mind was fried, and all I wanted to do was sit and rest and (of course!) play the Taylor.

After roughly 200 miles, four hours of driving, and a day of traffic, weather and no food, I was at my parent's place. No one was home. I ate some left over pizza and looked forward to the moment (after I washed my hands) that I'd be playing a whole new realm of guitar.

My folks came home and I related my tale. My father and I played some Johnny Cash. I stayed there overnight because we got more snow. I can think of worse places to be stranded with a guitar; a guitar that I put so much time into buying; a guitar that will be with me for many years. I barely slept that night, mostly because of the strange surroundings, but also because all I wanted to do was play.

The following week I came down with laryngitis and could not sing for a week with my new instrument. At the same time, it hasn't stopped me from getting to know its new voice.

Taylor 314ce Ltd-1 KOA



Type/Size	6-String Grand Auditorium
Back/Sides	Hawaiian Koa
Top	Sitka Spruce
Soundhole Rosette	Wood Fiber
Neck	Tropical American Mahogany
Fretboard	Ebony
Fretboard Inlay	Mother-of-Pearl Dots
Headstock Overlay	Indian Rosewood
Binding	Black Fiber
Bridge	Ebony
Nut & Saddle	Tusq
Tuning Machines	Taylor Chrome
Strings	Elixir Acoustic Light Gauge Bronze
Scale Length	25 1/2 inches
Truss Rod	Adjustable
Neck Width at Nut	1 3/4 inches
Number of Frets	20
Bracing	Scalloped, X-Brace
Finish	Gloss
Cutaway	Venetian
Electronics	Expression System
Body Width	16 inches
Body Depth	4 5/8 inches
Body Length	20 inches
Overall Length	41 inches
Case	Taylor Hardshell

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