

STRINGS PART 2: NEW STRINGS ATTACHED

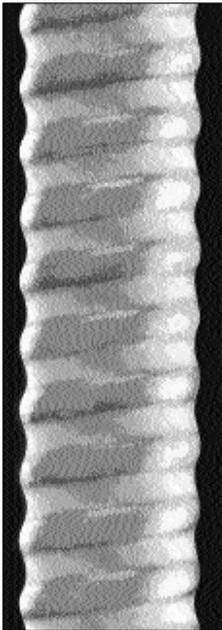
A S P U B L I S H E D I N W O O D & S T E E L

BY JIM KIRLIN

Since June 1, 1999 we've been factory-installing Elixir strings on all Taylor guitars (including Babys and Bases). The move to Elixir represents the first significant change in Taylor's string program in many years, and it came about for one very simple reason: Bob Taylor wanted to do it.

"When things are truly different, and truly better, I can get very excited about them," Bob explained recently. "That's how I feel about Elixir strings, and that's why I made the decision to begin using them as 'original' equipment at Taylor Guitars. I like the tone of Elixir strings, and they last and last and last, staying clean and brilliant to both the touch and the ear for much longer than I'm used to. End of story."

Well, not quite end of story. One of the benefits to consumers and retailers alike is the simple fact that Elixir strings, which are made by W.L. Gore & Associates, Inc., feature a "PolyWeb" coating that is more resistant to string corrosion than other brands. That means that a customer auditioning Taylor guitars in a store will be able to judge its actual tone, and will be less likely to be turned-off by an uncharacteristically dull sound caused by dead, dirty



Elixir string wrapped with PolyWeb coating

strings that have been on the guitar for far too long, subjected to every conceivable environmental condition, and handled by too many people.

For the long-awaited sequel to "Strings, Part 1", which ran in the Spring '95 issue (hey, we're very deliberate), Bob Taylor talked with Jim Kirlin about the move to Elixirs and why he considers them the perfect antidote for the "reverse Midas touch."

— The Editor

You've probably felt the letdown. You're in a music store, casually surveying the latest sampling of acoustic guitars, when one catches your eye. You carefully cherry-pick it from the wall with eager anticipation. The wood figure is gorgeous. The neck feels sleek and the action easy. You form a chord, give the strings a nice fluid strum and – thrnnng – dead strings.

"It's disappointing to think that a lot of times people are buying a set of strings when they buy a guitar," Bob Taylor concedes, sizing up the realities of guitar shopping. "The fact is, an inexpensive guitar with new strings is easier to sell than a top-of-the-line Taylor with dead strings. Give me a guitar that's cracked or old; give me any guitar you can name that doesn't seem new and fresh, then shine the frets up and put new strings on it, and you're gonna like playing it."

For a little while, anyway. And with Elixirs, a much longer while, it seems.

The PolyWeb-coated Elixir strings are another brainchild of W.L. Gore & Associates, makers of GoreTex[®] fabrics, Glide[®] dental floss, RideOn[®] bicycle cables and scores of other



high-tech products that serve medical, industrial, and other markets. The PolyWeb coating, a patent-pending hybrid polymer, is applied to wound guitar strings (steel-core wire with an 80/20 bronze wrap), creating a protective web that, when magnified, visually resembles a tightly clinging cocoon (see photo). The coating resists corrosion typically caused by perspiration, body oils, and dirt, and greatly extends the life of the strings.

To better appreciate what Elixir has done, consider the life of a standard phosphor/bronze set of strings, which we installed on our guitars for many years, and which generally are known to have a "bright" sound. If you think of string life as a linear continuum, the sound quality tends to drop off significantly after a short period of time. At first, a newly installed set of strings needs to be stretched to a point where they stay in tune. As Terry Myers has explained in other Tech-Sheets, and as most guitar techs know, all it really



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takes to “break-in” or “warm-up” new strings is to tug on each string as it’s installed, until it no longer goes flat. As long as they are properly stretched when installed, Myers says, the notion that new strings need a half-hour or so of playing time to “cure” is a joke.

Bob Taylor refers to the ensuing phase as the “meaty part” of the strings’ life, “where they’re not too bright, but they’re good and solid.” The duration of this phase depends on such variables as skin chemistry (e.g. the level of corrosive acidity in the skin’s natural oils), cleanliness, and other environmental factors, and therefore is too subjective to put in categorical terms; it could cover a few hours of playing, or a few days. But consider that most professional players rarely go more than a couple of shows or sessions before changing strings.

Elixir has honed in on that optimal part of the string life — the sound of a phosphor/bronze string after one hour of typical play — and expanded it considerably. Of course, as Bob well knows, major product innovations tend to provoke a flurry of opinions. So, before the critics leap to the podium to split hairs over Elixir’s tonal distinctions, Bob points the discussion toward a couple of Elixir’s marketing catch phrases: “Sound quality that lasts,” and “You make great music. We make great music last longer.”

“They’re not saying, ‘the best sound that ever was,’” Bob explains. “What they’re saying is, all strings fall really fast to a range, and we’ve expanded the heart of the string life.”

How long? Bob picks up the Elixir-strung 20th Anniversary GA-MC he keeps in his office and languidly arpeggiates a chord.

“I put these strings on seven months ago and they still sound good,” he says,

and they do. His guitar, he adds, occupies a setting similar to that of a music store. “Mostly it’s here ready to be grabbed, like a guitar on a store wall. People come in and play it, put it down; play it, put it down.”

Think back to the last time you noodled on an acoustic in a music store. Did you wash your hands before playing? How many people had probably played on that same set of strings? And how often do even the most diligent store staffers re-string their guitars?

Hence the benefits of Elixirs for retailer, player, and manufacturer alike.

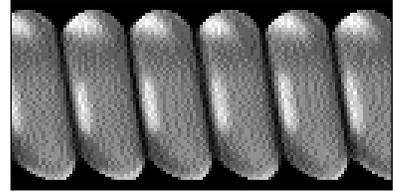
“A guitar might take two or three months to sell,” Bob points out. “It’s not like buying a stereo, where you see what they have, and they bring you a ‘fresh’ one out of the box. Guitars don’t get sold unless they’re out, being handled, being abused, being sweated on, being played, being scratched.

“I mean, you don’t even do that in cars; they have a couple of test models, and then you go pick the one you’re thinking of and you drive it around the block. When you buy a new car, it’s unusual to have more than 20 miles on it. A guitar sometimes has a huge number of miles on it.”

And some of those “test drivers” carry the bane of guitar players, what Bob calls “the reverse Midas touch” — skin chemistry with an unusually high acidic concentration. Bob has a friend who, when he worked at Taylor, was forbidden from touching a finished guitar, because in three or four minutes he could completely trash a new set of strings.

“Of course, he’d go into a music store and leave a pigpen wake of absolutely annihilated sets of strings,” Bob says. “These are people who come in and out of music stores.

“And so these [Elixir] strings will



Standard wound guitar string

work really well in that environment. I just highly recommend them for the guitar player who’s going to continue using them, because [over time] you’re going to spend less money on strings [Elixirs currently retail for about \$26]. But more than that, your guitar will sound better for longer periods of time.”

Bob admits that, over the years, he has pondered developing a line of strings, but claims they would only have been a “me, too” product. He also considered selling private label strings, but felt there wasn’t enough horsepower to take such a project to fruition.

“I told TJ [Baden], I’m sorry, I can’t come up with a quote that will legitimately tell somebody why the strings that we [would have] made or endorsed, or private-labeled and sold as ‘Taylor strings’, were better than somebody else’s. If ‘10’ is the factor, then some strings are 9-1/2 and some are 10-1/4, but in my mind, there hasn’t been much to distinguish one string from another until Elixir came along. All of a sudden, nobody had to ask me what I thought about it; I just announced it: we’re changing to these strings because I’m excited about Elixir strings. It finally makes sense; it is something different.”

Other improvements attributed to the PolyWeb’s coating properties include a faster, more lubricated feel, and slightly reduced string “squeak”. As for tone, the coating does add about one-per-



cent mass to each string, but in Bob's opinion, the tone really does closely compare to phosphor/bronze strings after an hour or so of play.

The Elixir string gauges on Taylors remain the same as those for the phosphor/bronze strings we formerly used: light for Grand Concerts, Grand Auditoriums, Baby Taylors and 12-strings (except the Leo Kottke Signature Model, which uses heavy gauges tuned down to C-sharp); medium for Dreadnoughts and Jumbos. The factory set-up process also remains the same.

If there is any drawback to the strings, it may simply be an aesthetic one. The coating does eventually fuzz up with wear around the picking/strumming and fret areas, but it doesn't seem to adversely affect the tone.

So far, Bob says, Elixirs seem to have far-reaching appeal among profes-

sional musicians, although this has led to an interesting irony: many players, despite loving the benefits of the strings, are so firmly entrenched in the habit of changing their strings every time they play that Elixir has turned down would-be endorsers because their die-hard routines defeat the product's primary selling point.

What seems to resonate strongly with Bob is the fact that Elixirs, like Gore's Glide dental floss and GoreTex outerwear, uses a strong platform of innovation and quality to create a strong market position.

"In a day when everyone wants the very best price on everything — we shop the Internet, we shop at 'club' stores, we shop everywhere looking for the best price — there's still room for someone to come out with a better product and sell it for more money simply because it's better and people

buy it," he says.

If Bob seems unabashed in his praise, it may just be his honest appreciation for bona fide innovation, especially in a day and age when many product "improvements" are fraught with, as he puts it, "hocus-pocus" and "mojo" that mislead people.

And if anyone possibly needs further evidence of Bob's fondness for Elixirs, they need only recognize how this arrangement seals his fate on ever being in the string business. Having a private label brand carries with it considerable profit and marketing potential, but to a great extent, Bob has forsaken that possibility, at least for the near future.

"You see what I'm saying? I'm giving up a future child to adopt this one."

And he sounds pretty happy about it.

For more details about Elixir strings, visit www.goremusic.com.

