

# THE MAGICIAN

**Creator of Exceptional Handcrafted Custom 1911s**

WRITTEN BY Skillset Staff IMAGES BY @Straight8Photo and Brady Miller

**JASON BURTON IS ONE OF THE MOST SOUGHT-AFTER 1911 NINJAS IN THE WORLD. THIS MASTER CRAFTSMAN CREATES ONE-** of-a-kind pistols that will leave your jaw on the floor. Owner of Heirloom Precision, his handcrafted customs are nothing short of works of art. We caught up with this master of metal, who graciously shared some of his sorcery. No illusions here; just place one of his firearms in your hand and you will be a true believer in the dark arts.

**Skillset Staff: When I thought of a top-tier 1911 builder, I pictured an angry 65-year-old man screaming at kids to get off his lawn. You actually look normal. Who in the hell are you?**

**Jason Burton:** [Laughs] I know... it's kind of funny when I meet people or introduce myself at trade shows, shooting events, classes or wherever, and they figure out who I am, I often get the "I thought you'd be older" comment. I always tell them, "Yeah, I thought I'd be taller." Not that I'm somebody important or anything, but just

that people always find my relative youth interesting. I'm just a 40 year-old guy who loves guns. So I guess, in a way, I'm actually a bit flattered that folks would think I should be older.

**S.S.: What made you wake up one day and say, "I want to make custom 1911's"?**

**J.B.:** It wasn't one singular thing; where I am today is better described as a journey. I was lucky to be brought up in an environment that taught me about guns and made them available to me. I got my first gun when I was four or five years old—still have it—a Winchester 1904 single-shot 22. I got my first pistol when I was 14 or so, a Colt Woodsman. Wish I still had that one.

The 1911 was the first handgun I ever shot. My dad had a USGI 1911—not 1911A1, but a legit 1911—and we would take it with us every time we went shooting. My dad was a gun guy and very naturally mechanical. I suppose my fascination with all things mechanical comes from him.

I realized the utility of a handgun at an early age, so when I turned 21, I wasn't as excited to be of legal drinking age as I was to get my concealed pistol license (I was still living in Washington State). So I got my permit and thought I had it all figured out... I had a Smith & Wesson 669 (a little compact stainless steel 9mm) and strapped this thing on in whatever shitty holster I had at the time. It took only a couple of weeks for me to realize this might not be the best carry setup for me.

I figured out pretty quickly I knew basically nothing about carrying a gun or quality carry gear, so I started doing carry-gun musical chairs, experimenting with different guns and carry setups. I tried everything from full-size, compact models, revolvers; I carried Sigs, Glocks, Smith & Wesson semi-autos and J-frames, as well as Colt D-frames... anything I could get my hands on to find what might best work for me.

At the time I had a 1911, a bone-stock Colt 1991-A1, but I thought it would be too big to carry. And besides, it had a shitty trig-

**Q+A**  
with Jason Burton





A custom build is an investment of time and effort to produce only the best possible product.



ger, tiny sights and was full of sharp edges. This was in the late '90s, when Kimber was dominating the factory/production 1911 market. The Kimber pistols are out-of-the-box with all the bells and whistles, so I bought one used at a gun store, a Compact Aluminum Stainless. Remember, this

## “A lot of people figured they’d rather have eight big bullets than 10 smaller ones, and the 1911 market saw many new buyers.”

was during the [Clinton] crime bill and the magazine capacity ban, so I did what a lot of others gun buyers did: chose a compact 1911 that would hold eight rounds of 45ACP over my compact Glock 19 that could then only be bought new with 10 round magazines. It’s worth noting that this time frame and political gun-ban situation was what helped fuel the 1911 resurgence. A lot of people figured they’d rather have eight big bullets than 10 smaller ones, and the 1911

market saw many new buyers.

So I had this Kimber Compact and a decent IWB holster, and I realized it was really easy to carry, much easier than my Glock 19. But I didn’t really like shooting the aluminum frame, so I started to wonder if I should get a full-size 1911. I still had my

Colt 1991-A1, but it wouldn’t do in its current configuration, so off to the gun store, where I found a used Kimber Custom: a full-size, all-steel, five-inch-barreled 45ACP. God’s gun. I put on this gun and noticed immediately how easy it was to carry. I was off to the races; I wanted to know more and own more 1911s.

So I dove into the 1911 world and discovered the higher-end guns and carry gear over the next few years. By 2001, I’d already

gone from factory and production 1911s to semi-custom guns from Wilson Combat, Les Baer and Ed Brown. These guns are a huge step up from production 1911s, and I began to wonder what else was out there. Then I discovered the custom 1911 world and the various small and often one-man shops. I was bought and paid for right then and there.

I started to search out guns from both current and past makers. The first real custom 1911 I bought was a full-house Swenson built Series 70 Colt. Next came another Swenson gun (this one built on a USGI Ithaca), then a Nastoff gun, a couple of Hoag guns, a Pachmayr Combat Special, Heinie guns, a Garthwaite gun, a Mark Morris gun, a Chuck Rogers gun, a Mark Krebs gun, a Novak gun, a Bob Chow gun, a few more Swenson guns (Armand Swenson is actually quite a focus of 1911 history for me), a Kings gun, a Yost gun, a Ned Christiansen gun, a CT Brian gun and more (later I added a couple of Devels and an ASP, but custom 1911s remained my focus).

They became all-consuming but in a good way (when I moved to Arizona I had



Each pistol/base gun receives the detailed attention and compliment of work it needs in order to result in an end product that can only be described as “the best”.

something like 20 custom 1911s), and over the years I’ve been fortunate to see and shoot a lot of custom guns. What’s more is I got to take them apart and see what was going on inside.

During this time, I was getting more and more involved in shooting and training. I owned my own business in Washington and it gave me enough freedom to invest time and money into learning how to shoot, as well as expand my collection of 1911s. When I saw what was possible for the platform, not only from a building standpoint, but also a shooting standpoint, I got even more interested and started tinkering around with my own guns. I was lucky enough to have friends who let me “work” on their guns as well.

I had met and become friends with quite a few custom 1911 builders, and in 2005 I got an offer to move to Arizona to manage a custom shop while also expanding my knowledge of building 1911s. Within six months I sold my business, and in late 2005 I landed in Arizona.

Above all else, I wanted to build custom 1911s because I was infatuated with not

## “A friend of mine asked me what I wanted to do. My reply: “I want to build a perfect 1911.”

only what could be done to customize the gun, but also what the gun could do from a shooting standpoint. I remember, before I moved to Arizona, a friend of mine asked me what I wanted to do. My reply: “I want to build a perfect 1911.” I haven’t done it yet (I don’t think anybody has), but over the last 10 years of doing this I’ve tried not to waste a day doing anything but my best.

**S.S.: Every Padawan had a Jedi Master. Who’s your Obi-Wan?**

**J.B.:** I’m lucky. I’ve had many people who I consider influential to my work and building philosophy. When I first moved to Ari-

zona, my former business partner Ted Yost passed on knowledge to me about machining and what would become the basis on which I developed and advanced the building techniques I use today.

Having owned, shot and inspected guns from other customer makers was also a great teacher of sorts. Those experiences showed me what I wanted to do and what I did not want to do. Some of my largest influences, however, have come from the shooting community. Clint Smith at Thunder Ranch was my very first professional firearms instructor in the early 2000s, and I have been a student of his ever since.

I’ve built Clint quite a few guns, which has led to he and I becoming very good friends. In 2011, I was invited to be a staff instructor at Thunder Ranch. Clint is, without question, one of the biggest influences on my perspective about guns, gear shooting and tactics, which has certainly helped to shape my philosophy pertaining to the guns I build. It is easy to say that he has been a mentor of mine, and being able to see guns used in that teaching/training environment has been invaluable.





**“With each new custom build I am chasing perfection while furthering my commitment to only build products that meet my rigorous standards and desire for excellence.”**



Rob Leatham has been another big influence. I met Rob when I first moved to Arizona, and his knowledge about all things shooting and gun-related has allowed me to not only progress as a shooter, but also to be a more knowledgeable and well-informed gunsmith.

Having these influences on the shooting side helped me to become better at building 1911s in ways I could have never imagined. When you get to see these guns used by guys who are masters of their craft and experts in their respective fields, you learn something about the guns that you can't learn in a book or by just standing at a milling machine or sitting behind a bench all day long. I still shoot as much as I can, because every time I press the trigger I'm getting real-time information relevant to my craft.

**S.S.: What's the customer experience like when you're building a gun? Do you interact with them, or do you tell them to just sit back and enjoy the ride?**

**J.B.:** I would say it's fairly interactive. There is obviously a certain style of gun that I build and am known for, and there are certain elements or parameters I apply to every gun I build, but the customer's input and desired outcome for the piece is still a big component.

When the point comes where I have worked my way to each customer's gun, I want to know as much as I can about what the customer likes ergonomically, cosmetically, as well as what they intend to do with the gun. Even though all I build is full-house pistols, each gun is, for the most part, still built to customer specs.

**S.S.: Have you made any custom 1911s for celebrities?**

**J.B.:** Yes.

**S.S.: Give me your top three favorite builds.**

**J.B.:** It's hard to narrow down what my favorites would be. I'll build pretty much anything, so long as it fits my style and it's not a ridiculous configuration, but traditional Government Models have always been my favorite. Everything starts and ends with a Government Model for me. A polished blued gun that is a traditional configuration in 45ACP is still my overall favorite.

I love building two-tone guns, traditional two-tone guns with a polished blued slide sitting atop a matte hard chrome frame. The

Pachmayr Combat Special popularized the two-tone gun. In a way, every two-tone gun I build is like a small tribute to the Combat Specials.

Anything with a squared trigger guard is also a lot of fun to build. It takes a lot of work to get them right, but in the end, when the gun looks like it was born that way, it's worth all the effort.

**S.S.: What does your wait list look like? How much does the average customer invest?**

**J.B.:** Wait list is a couple of years right now, maybe two and a half. Allot depends on how long it takes me to do each gun so I can move to the next project. You know, one gun could literally take days longer than the one before it, and that will affect lead-time.

As for cost, here again the time it takes to build the gun and do it right is the biggest variable. Every gun is truly a one of a kind collaborative project between my skillset and style and the customer's vision for the build. It's allot like saying 'I have a '65 Mustang I want restored perfectly or built into a custom, how much is it?' It's hard to put a price on that especially considering the work that may need to be done correcting things on each base gun, so much depends on the variables from project to project. Recent builds have been priced at \$8,000-\$15,000 on the customer supplied base gun.

**S.S.: Your 1911 photos are incredible. Who's your photographer?**

**J.B.:** My pal, Brady Miller, does all my photos. Since we're good friends, I can usually bribe him with a steak dinner and a tall glass of scotch. Brady is completely self-taught; he owns a company called Monkey Edge that sells high-end custom knives and gear, and he started taking photos out of a need for good product shots. His photos are awesome, and since we are both into the same stuff (guns, knives, watches, etcetera), he knows how to capture my work in the best way.

**S.S.: It's obvious what gun you carry every day, but walk us through your entire EDC.**

**J.B.:** Yeah, a full-size all steel Government Model in 45ACP. I have lots of other guns well-suited to carry, but 99.99 per cent of the time you'll find me carrying a 45ACP Government Model. I carry it in an IWB holster and back it up with at least two spare

magazines. My standard load-out also includes a flashlight—I really like the Streamlight ProTac 2L—and my go-everywhere knife is a Strider SMF. If I tote a back-up gun, it's typically a J-frame or a Springfield XD-S in an ankle rig.

**S.S.: You can't build guns 24 hours a day. What else is Jason Burton into?**

**J.B.:** Well, if you ask my wife, she'll tell you I eat, sleep, breathe and live guns. To an extent, she's correct. Guns have always been a part of my life, and since my first days in this industry I've felt like I'm the luckiest guy in the world. I mean, I get to work in America building things with my hands. That's pretty awesome if you ask me.

So if I'm not at the shop, truth is I'm probably shooting. But it's not always 1911s. I like shooting pretty much everything; I'm a big Smith & Wesson revolver geek and I love rifles of all types, from AR/M4 pattern guns to Sharps rifles.

**S.S.: Closing arguments. For the novice shooter, or for the guy who wants to invest in his first handgun, 1911 or...?**

**J.B.:** For the novice shooter, seek competent instruction, especially if you are planning to carry a gun for self-defense. Don't get wrapped up in fads. The gun industry is full of "what's cool this week," but it's far more important to find what works for you based on your actual application, rather than trying to be the kid on the playground who has the newest pair of sneakers. For the new handgun buyer, shoot everything you can. It's the only way to make a properly informed decision. And again, choose a gun that actually benefits your needs and your application.

For the new 1911 buyer, start with a budget in mind. The 1911s can run from \$500 to \$10,000, so have a target price point and find what works for you. For example, a new 1911 buyer doesn't need one of my guns. I'd be happy to build one for that buyer, but it's not a requirement. What a new 1911 buyer needs is a quality piece that allows them to explore the platform in a trouble-free environment. So choose a gun and a brand that has a good reputation for build quality and customer service, just in case you need it.

Lastly, buy good ammo and good magazines. If you buy a 1911 and feed it Billy-Bob's Rattle-Shack Reloads from a gun show magazine special, you are setting yourself up for failure. ☹