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The ART of the ARCHTOP

A Classic Design Endures as the Choice of Jazz Guitarists

By Keith Baumann

THE ORIGINS OF THE MODERN GUITAR CAN BE TRACED BACK HUNDREDS, if not thousands, of years. But for many jazz players, the most important date in the instrument's long history is 1897, when Orville Gibson introduced the first carved archtop guitar. Since then, the archtop has made an undeniable impact on the evolution of jazz and popular music. Surviving radical shifts in musical taste and huge technological advancements, this uniquely American innovation has steadily held its own and continues to maintain a fiercely loyal following among players and luthiers who appreciate its strong tradition and also understand its continually evolving and limitless potential.

Gibson broke new ground when he applied traditional Italian violin-making techniques to the construction of fretted instruments in order to achieve greater clarity and projection. In the early 1900s, the newly formed Gibson Company produced guitars and mandolins that featured carved tops and backs, X-pattern bracing, floating bridges and an oval-shaped sound hole. In 1922, hoping to boost sagging sales, Gibson hired acoustic engineer Lloyd Loar to redesign the company's offerings. Loar made several key modifications to Orville's original designs, adding violin-style f-holes, parallel bracing bars, elongated fingerboards and tap-tuned carved tops to maximize responsiveness. Although he was with Gibson for a few brief years, Loar's two instruments, the F5 Master Model mandolin and the L5 Master Model archtop guitar, became part of the fabric of American music—with the F5 mandolin sculpting the sound of bluegrass music in the hands of Bill Monroe and the L5 guitar becoming the de facto standard for jazz guitarists worldwide.

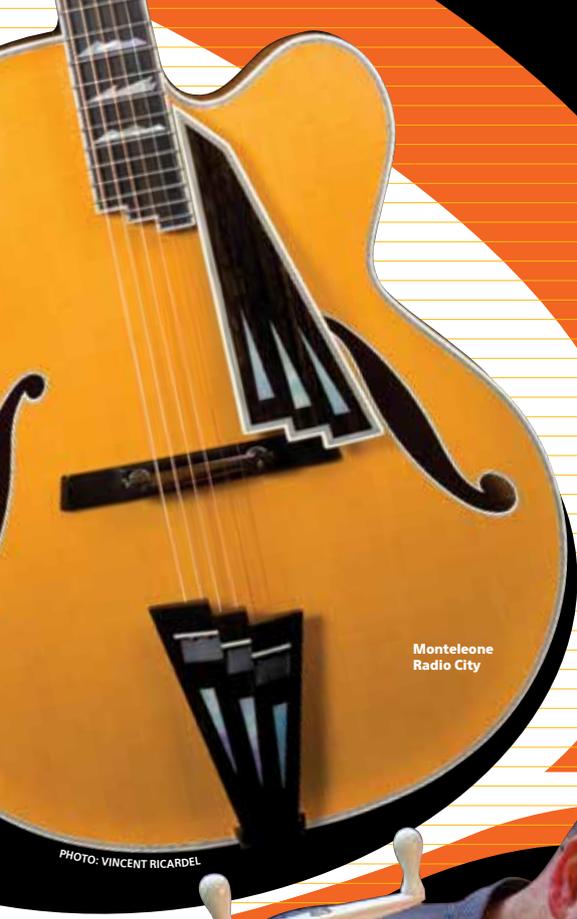
Engineered to cut through the volume of a large orchestra, the L5 was designed as an acoustic rhythm instrument. It was so successful that with-

in a few short years the archtop had completely replaced the tenor banjo as the jazz musician's rhythm tool of choice. Gibson and other manufacturers continued to refine the archtop by increasing body size for more volume and adding cutaways for higher fret access. Eventually magnetic pickups were added to the archtop, allowing it to be featured as a solo instrument. The unique tone produced by amplifying a fully acoustic guitar endures to this day as the heart and soul of the jazz guitar sound.

Many guitar builders have followed in Gibson and Loar's footsteps over the last 116 years. Numerous manufacturers and luthiers simply copied the original Loar designs, but others took their own paths, creating instruments tailored to the needs of the constantly evolving jazz musician. New York's John D'Angelico and his apprentice Jimmy D'Aquisto were among the most well-known and respected luthiers who pushed the envelope of modern archtop design, inspiring a whole new generation of builders.

Even though the archtop represents a relatively small niche in today's overall guitar market, there is a surprisingly large number of luthiers current-





Monteleone
Radio City

PHOTO: VINCENT RICARDEL

Frank Vignola
plays a Thorell
FV Studio.

PHOTO: RAY TIGGART



Wilkie 16-inch
Northern Flyer



PHOTO: EMILY CHARETTE



Bob Benedetto
literally wrote the
book on how to
build an archtop.
Left: carving a
45th anniversary
Benedetto guitar
headstock.





ly devoted to the art of hand-building custom archtop instruments. In addition, several established guitar manufacturers now feature a selection of archtop models within their product lines. To gain insight into the instrument's subtle nuances and long-lasting appeal, we interviewed some of the finest master archtop builders and a few select factory builders. Although each luthier strives to place his individual stamp on each guitar, they all share a set of core values that define what the archtop guitar is all about.

The luthiers we spoke with expressed strong feelings of respect for the tradition created by the builders that have preceded them. They are also aware of the significant role that players occupy in influencing the evolution of archtop design. From the first rough cut of the tonewood to final finishing and setup, luthiers are absolutely in love with the process of building a guitar.

Monteleone

JOHN MONTELEONE IS ONE OF THE MOST respected builders in the business today. Known for his innovative design work and amazing tone, Monteleone considers his acoustic archtop guitars to be works of "playable art." Monteleone is primarily self-taught but credits much of his experience to his years as an instrument repairman. He began his building career by making F5 mandolin copies, and after growing tired of cloning Loar's work, he completely redesigned the F5, resulting in a new model, the Grand Artist. Monteleone introduced his first archtop guitar, the Eclipse, in 1978 and has gone on to create an array of stunning instruments, including his acclaimed Radio City archtop, with its Art Deco-influenced architectural motif.

Monteleone is a custom builder and cites D'Angelico as a major influence. "You could really sense the skill and personality in his guitars," he said. Monteleone is also a big fan of the original Orville Gibson guitars and utilizes oval-shaped sound ports in several of his models. According to Monteleone, an archtop should have a clear, brilliant tone with a nice balance and plenty of cutting power that allows you to hear the wood and not just the strings. "One of my goals has always been to

produce treble tones that are sweet and lyrical like a human voice," he said. Monteleone attributes the endurance of the archtop to its inherent beauty along with its ability to function as an acoustic, electric or combination of both.

Benedetto

BOB BENEDETTO IS A NAME that comes up frequently when talking with other luthiers—no surprise, since he literally wrote the book on archtop guitar building. Aspiring builders around the world have used his book, *Making An Archtop Guitar*, to kick-start their own careers. Benedetto has been in the business for 45 years and has grown from a one-man shop into a small manufacturer. He is mostly self-taught and has a background in repair as well as violin making. Right from the beginning in 1968, he focused on archtop guitars, citing a strong influence from Gibson and D'Angelico. Benedetto feels that the strength of the archtop lies in its unrivaled sound and unique feel, and he considers himself a refiner of the guitar, not a re-designer. "It is mostly the maker and not the wood that makes an instrument," he said.

Benedetto wholeheartedly embraces the traditional and sees no need to stray too far from time-honored designs. His refinements are in the fine details, such as tap-tuning and subtle neck improvements. "The real challenge is using the same design parameters to create a wonderfully voiced instrument," he said. Although the company has expanded into a staff of 10 and produces a large selection of models, Benedetto's involvement remains mainly with the high-end hand-carved archtops. Benedetto Guitars offers archtops in a variety of styles and price points and does custom one-off work. The Flagship Series features the carved models, and the Professional Series includes laminated and solid chambered bodies.

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Thorell

UTAH LUTHIER RYAN THORELL FEELS rhythm playing and note separation are the heart of the archtop guitar, which he considers to be the “sound of jazz” and “a living American tradition.” Thorell started building guitars in 1996 and carved his first archtop in 2005. He is a huge fan of the Lloyd Loar archtops and is also influenced by the New York school of D’Angelico and D’Aquila. A true hand-builder, Thorell feels the archtop’s appeal lies in its limitless potential and ability to produce a consistent tone from the lowest to highest notes. The Sweet E and FV (Frank Vignola) are some of his better-know models, but Thorell enjoys building custom instruments that can be individually voiced for a particular player. Although he maintains a strong respect and love for the tradition, Thorell considers his craft to be a vibrant process that is constantly evolving. He often experiments with sound port placement and utilizes a subtler arch on his guitars’ tops to produce a richer tone, which he feels has become more important than generating sheer volume.

Campelleone

EAST COAST BUILDER MARK CAMPELLEONE started out building electric basses and doing repair and restoration work. But when he built his first

archtop in 1980, he was instantly hooked. Campelleone has an art background, which he feels has been beneficial to his guitar building. He offers a select line of hand-carved archtops in his Standard, Deluxe and Special Series. Campelleone’s premier guitar is his Cameo, and he also offers a 15-inch design in his EP Series. His primary goal has always been to build a traditional

Loar-style archtop, and he said that his attraction to the guitars stems from the beauty of the instruments, which are like sculptures to him. In terms of why the archtop has endured for so many years, Campelleone pointed out that the unique sound of the amplified acoustic guitar has never been duplicated in a solid body.

Wilkie

WYATT WILKIE OF WILKIE STRINGED Instruments summed up his infatuation with archtop building when he said, “I can’t help myself.” Wilkie started out as a mandolin maker and got his initial exposure to archtops through his association with Calton Cases, where he had to examine and measure instruments for clients ordering custom flight cases. Wilkie was fortunate to apprentice with Benedetto and recalled how “that changed everything.” He hand-builds two basic models in his British Columbia workshop: the Northern Flyer and the Strathcona. He also does custom orders. “The mystery of acoustic tone is so alluring,” said Wilkie, noting that it’s all about the wood. “Acoustic music in general has endured longer than amplified music, and it’s about the feel as much as it is the tone.”

Marchione

STEPHEN MARCHIONE OF TEXAS GOT HIS start as a violin maker and has been building guitars full-time since 1990. He gained a deep respect for the instrument during his college years while playing in big bands and bases most of his designs on the classic archtops of D’Angelico and D’Aquila. Marchione pointed out that “the archtop is a transcendent thing that rises above being a simple instrument.” As a



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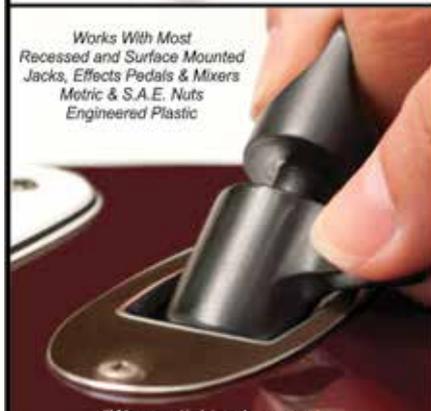
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player himself, he feels that these guitars are extremely compelling and deeply satisfying to hold and play, and that hand carving is the only way to truly voice an instrument. "You really have to listen to the wood," he said. Marchione offers hand-built archtop models that range in size from a 15-inch up to an 18-inch and even include a 7-string and baritone design.

Andersen

SEATTLE'S STEVEN ANDERSEN has been building guitars since high school. After starting his own shop, Andersen began to focus on building F5 mandolins and doing repair work. The opportunity to examine and work on a wide variety of classic archtop instruments was a significant factor in sparking his building career. Andersen built his first archtop in the late 1980s and considers himself to be mostly self-taught. "James D'Aquisto was a big inspiration, particularly his innovative cutting-edge guitars, which inspired me to create my own designs," he said. Regarding his personal building style, Andersen noted, "There is always room for innovation and experimentation." A true artisan who builds each guitar one at a time, by hand, Anderson said that he senses a deep emotional connection

with the player who relates to the feel and unique acoustic properties of the guitar. He offers three models in his Premium line and three models in the Standard line. In addition, Andersen builds a line of Specialty models.

D'Lorenzo

SCOTT LAWRENCE OF D'LORENZO Guitars in Oklahoma tries to stay "at the intersection tradition of and innovation." Lawrence warmed up on a few flat-top guitar kits before building his first archtop in 2003. His background includes experience as an instrument repairman as well as furniture building and cabinet restoration. Lawrence used the Gibson ES-175 as a take-off point for his first archtop but utilized a hand-carved top instead of the usual laminate to increase acoustic responsiveness. He also cites Benedetto's book and CDs as learning tools and draws inspiration from D'Aquisto's innovative attempts at improving acoustic tone. Lawrence summed up his attraction to the archtop by saying, "It is classy, beautiful and graceful even without ornamentation." As a builder, he is constantly evolving and taking chances, which he feels is the only way to innovate. Lawrence shoots for a different tone, searching for some-

thing between an archtop and a flat top with lots of warmth and a longer note sustain. He puts his personal stamp on his guitars with custom cutaway profiles, beautiful comma-shaped f-holes and utilization of non-standard woods such as mahogany, rosewood, cedar and walnut. Two basic models are available directly from D'Lorenzo Guitars: the fully acoustic NCAT (New Concept Arch Top) and the Blue Flame Electric Archtop.

Laplante

JEAN-PIERRE LAPLANTE IS A Canadian luthier who wants to push the archtop in new directions. Mainly self-taught, he built his first Telecaster-style electric guitar in 1993 but began his love affair with the archtop in 2003 when he was commissioned to build a guitar in the L5 style. Laplante immediately realized how much more rewarding this process was for him compared to building solid-body electrics. He is highly influenced by Benedetto for the basics but cites Monteleone as a major inspiration for innovation and design: "He is so creative and inspired me to move away from the tradition, and [Monteleone] showed me there is still room to take the guitar somewhere else," he said. Laplante enjoys the challenge of building and hopes to push the envelope of the archtop and expand its audience. His feeling on the appeal of the guitar is that each one has its own personality, and from the player's perspective, it makes you want to play differently and inspires new ideas and creativity. He addresses the archtop's ongoing evolution with several design changes, including lighter bracing techniques and redesigned soundhole placement. Laplante produces numerous archtop models from his one-man shop, and he noted that the 16-inch dual pickup laminate models like the Springtime and Summertime are the bread-and-butter of his business. He also offers several fully carved models.

Pagelli

CLAUDIO PAGELLI, WHO BUILDS his guitars in Switzerland, also utilized Benedetto's book in developing his craft. He loves the old Epiphones and Strombergs but goes his own way with designing archtops for open-minded players. Several of his models feature a radical departure from standard archtop designs, and he prides himself on improving upon the ergonomics of the guitar. Pagelli describes his guitars as "Swiss precision with an Italian flair." He feels he has an advantage living close to the Swiss Alps, where some of

the finest spruce tonewood is grown. Pagelli offers several archtop models, including the Patent, Traditional, Jazzability and Ana Sgler, and also does plenty of custom work.

Sadowsky

ROGER SADOWSKY BEGAN HIS journey with repair and restoration work. Realizing that to be a great builder you need to be around the great players, he relocated to New York. Although he considers himself self-taught, Sadowsky spent two years as an apprentice to Augustino LoPrinzi. As a repairman, Sadowsky became aware of the problems associated with amplifying an acoustic guitar. He also spent 15 years servicing jazz legend Jim Hall's D'Aquisto archtop. These experiences set him on a mission to design and build a road-worthy instrument that could be easily amplified. Sadowsky worked closely with Hall in developing his



first archtop guitar, which, like Hall's D'Aquisto, was a laminate. "I was trying to build a guitar that Jim would be comfortable with," Sadowsky said. The resulting guitar was the Jim Hall model, his premier archtop.

Sadowsky's archtops are made in Japan, where he also manufactures his Metro Line of basses. He does the final fretwork, electronics and setup at his shop in New York. Sadowsky's main goal is to produce guitars for gigging musicians, and all his models feature a special laminate top that not only offers resistance to feedback but responds well acoustically. He sees a current trend toward smaller body sizes and shallower depth and reflects this in many of his guitars. Affordability is also a top priority for Sadowsky. In addition to the Jim Hall, Sadowsky Guitars now offers a wide range of archtop models, including the Jimmy Bruno, the LS-17 and SS-15, plus a semi-hollow model.

Godin

GODIN GUITARS WAS A WELL-ESTABLISHED company before it released its first archtop guitar. Robert Godin, a jazz player, felt there was a lack of decent affordable guitars, so he decided to fill the void with the 5th Avenue, an all-acoustic laminate archtop fea-

turing Canadian woods and built entirely in North America. According to Godin, value and innovation are keys to the success of the company's archtops. He feels that demand for archtops is high with many musicians discovering jazz and taking it in new directions. Godin archtops are manufactured using CNC machinery and laser cutters, techniques that play a major role in allowing them to offer consistent quality at attractive prices.

D'Angelico

D'ANGELICO GUITARS OWNS THE exclusive rights to use the name of the world-renowned guitar maker (who passed away in 1964). Initially offering only inexpensive import copies of the legendary archtops, D'Angelico Guitars has recently undergone significant changes, revamping its import line and introducing a new USA Masterbuilt Guitar, which is an entirely hand-crafted clone of a 1943 Excel. According to Sales V.P. Adam Aronson, D'Angelico Guitars used the original blueprints and an MRI machine to reproduce an Excel as closely as possible. "D'Angelico was a major player and was known for quality," Aronson said. "We want to live up to the name." D'Angelico's standard line is manufactured in its

Korean factory and features the EXL-1, EX-SS and EX-SD.

Ibanez

IBANEZ, WHICH STARTED OUT by copying classic American guitars in Japan, began building archtops in the mid-1970s but really made a mark in 1978 with its first George Benson signature guitar. Ibanez later expanded the line with a Pat Metheny model. In distinguishing Ibanez from a custom builder, company spokesperson Ken Youmans said, "We build guitars for a market segment as opposed to an individual player, and even though we do production, it is still an art form to us." While archtops are not huge sellers for Ibanez, the guitars are a point of pride that's critical to the company's reputation. Ibanez currently offers three lines of laminate guitars in its archtop series. Manufactured in China, the Artcore is the most affordable line, followed by the Artstar Series. The Japanese-made Signature Series represents Ibanez's high-end offerings.

Eastman

HAVING PRODUCED A FULL LINE of orchestra instruments for years, archtop guitars were a logical next step for the Eastman Guitar and

Mandolin Company. Eastman translated Benedetto's videos into Mandarin to train the company's craftsmen. "We wanted to build guitars with the exact same methods used during the golden age of archtop design," said product specialist Mark Herring. Eastman built its flagship models, the AR805CE and AR810CE, in 2001 using traditional hand-carving techniques and established a new standard in quality from a Chinese manufacturer. Producing fully hand-carved guitars out of an Asian factory was a visionary concept and has allowed Eastman to offer professional-grade instruments at extremely affordable prices. "We walk the fine line between manufacturing and hand-crafting," Herring explained. Eastman now offers a selection of all solid-wood, hand-built archtops and recently added a laminate model.

More than a century after its introduction, the archtop guitar is still very much alive and well. Although it is always evolving, it never loses sight of its roots. While it continues to attract and inspire new fans, it never leaves behind its loyal devotees. Its magic can be found as much in the skilled hands of its dedicated builders as in the artistry of its great players. **DB**

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