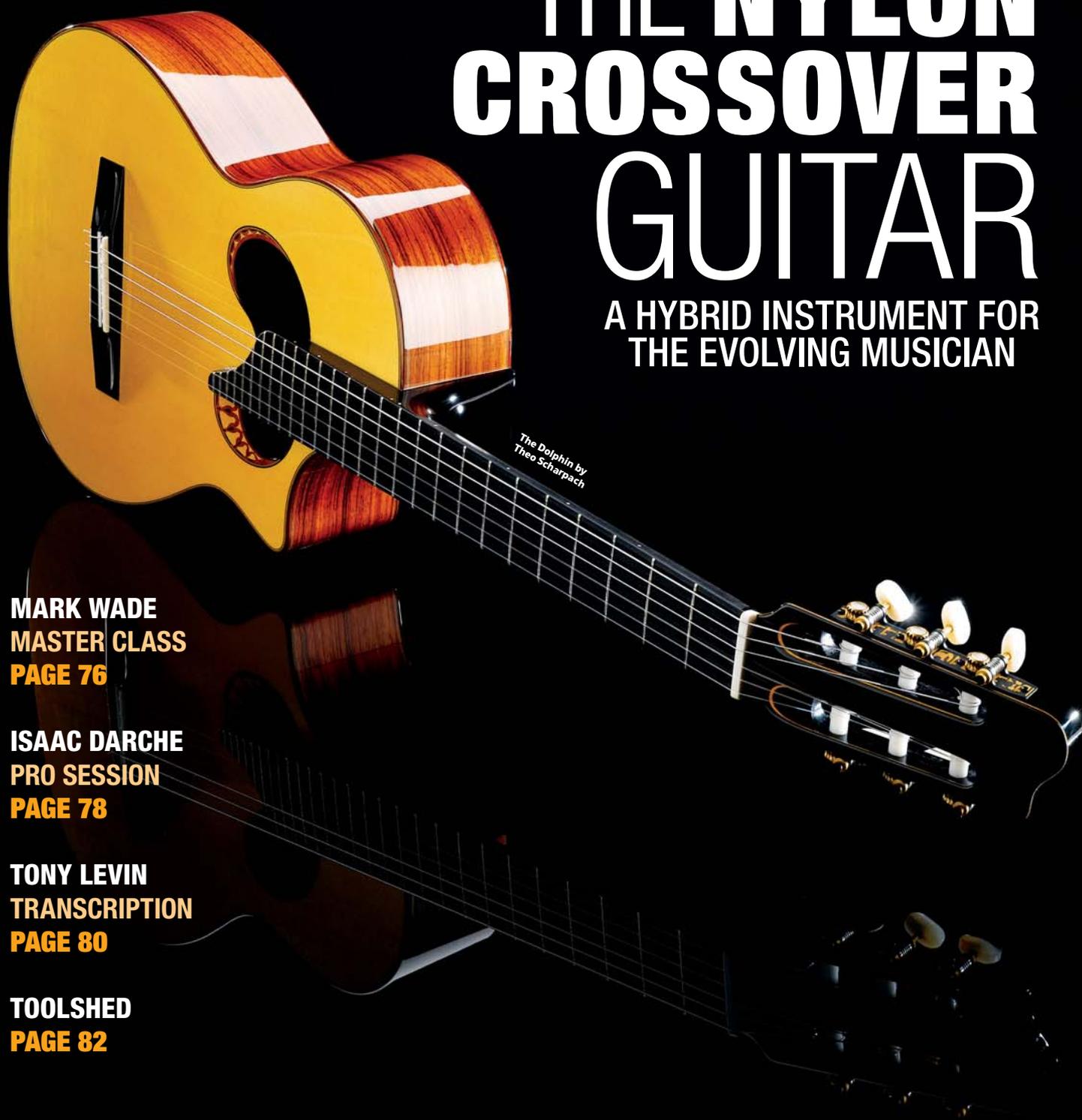


GUITAR SCHOOL

DOWNBEAT GUIDE TO LEARNING JAZZ

THE NYLON CROSSOVER GUITAR

A HYBRID INSTRUMENT FOR
THE EVOLVING MUSICIAN



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GUITAR SCHOOL

THE NYLON CROSSOVER GUITAR

A HYBRID INSTRUMENT FOR THE EVOLVING MUSICIAN

BY KEITH BAUMANN

The acoustic guitar has an ancestry that dates back thousands of years and includes contributions from numerous cultures throughout the world. However, the birth of the modern classical guitar is generally credited to Spanish luthier Antonio de Torres—who, in the 1850s, introduced many of the design concepts and construction techniques that would become the blueprint for all classical guitar makers to follow.

Prior to Torres' innovations, guitars featured small, shallow bod-

ies and strings manufactured from animal gut, which resulted in very low projection. Torres increased the body size and reconfigured its shape, developed a fan bracing system and added a new bridge design to create a more efficient instrument and to maximize the volume created by the gut strings. In the United States, a German immigrant named Christian Fredrich Martin was developing his own plans for the guitar, and his innovations would forever split the guitar world into two distinct camps.

Martin, founder of the Martin Guitar Company, understood the unique demands of the American market. In the early 1900s, he realized the need for a guitar capable

of increased volume that could compete alongside the banjo and mandolins that were at the height of popularity at that time. His solution was to utilize the same steel strings used on those instruments on his guitars. The radical difference in string tension between gut and steel required some design alterations, and Martin developed the X-bracing system to handle the increased pressure. This was an extremely significant milestone in guitar evolution.

With the guitar world now divided between gut and steel strings, there was much debate over the benefits and disadvantages of each. Each of these instruments produced a drastically different sound and even required different techniques to play. The largely European classical music world remained firmly planted in the gut camp, and the mainly American folk and popular music players went with steel. In the



Archangel by Murray Kuun

Taylor 812ce-N

mid-1940s, a shortage of gut due to the surgical needs of World War II prompted the changeover to a newly developed material called nylon. Quickly realizing its advantages—such as increased volume and better tuning stability—nylon soon became the standard for classical guitars.

Over the years, many non-classical musicians have been drawn toward nylon, finding that it offers a depth of expression and sensitivity not available with steel. Particularly well suited for fingerstyle, many folk and jazz players have adopted nylon-string guitars. In fact, it is the preferred choice in much of South American jazz. Unfortunately, steel-string and classical guitars feature some basic ergonomic differences that present a real challenge to players who seek to transition between the two types of instruments. Most notably, the wider nut width of the classical along with the flat fingerboard and lower string tension represent a serious frustration to musicians moving from steel to nylon. Also, the lower volume of an unamplified classical guitar makes them difficult to play in ensemble or live-performance situations. However, there is a solution, and it can be found in the “hybrid” or

“crossover” guitars that offer the nylon-string experience to the steel-string player.

Simply put, a hybrid or crossover guitar is a nylon-string instrument that is constructed using many of the design elements of a steel-string instrument. Common elements include cutaway bodies with a radiused fingerboard, longer scale lengths and the narrower nut widths common to steel-string guitars. Most also feature some type of onboard piezo amplification. (Magnetic pickups will not function with gut strings.) The hybrid concept actually goes back to 1932, when Selmer introduced its Maccaferri-designed instrument. Popularized by Django Reinhardt, it was a cross between a flamenco and a jazz guitar and was strung with special copper-wound strings. Although no one knows for sure when the first nylon hybrid appeared, one of the earliest examples was the solid-body Gibson Chet Atkins Classical Electric Model introduced in 1982. James D'Aquisto also built an acoustic crossover nylon in 1982, and Bob Benedetto entered the game in 1994 with his Renaissance II Fiorentino nylon-string archtop.

Until now, there has been a slow yet steady following for these instruments. Hybrid enthusiasts remain a relatively small segment of the market—many attribute this to a simple lack of awareness compounded by insufficient exposure of players to decent quality hybrids. There is no doubt that today the availability of nylon hybrid/crossover guitars is rapidly expanding, with several major companies and hand-builders providing offerings in acoustic, semi-hollow, solidbody and even archtop designs. But will this increased production result in a new generation of hybrid players? To answer this question, we talked with several luthiers and guitar manufacturers that offer hybrid models to find out why they make them, how they build them and who is playing them.

Dake Traphagen

With his roots in violin making, Dake Traphagen of Traphagen Guitars is a luthier with more than 25 years of experience who has focused mainly on handcrafting classical guitars. He began to develop his crossover guitar models due to client demand for nylon guitars with narrower necks, low action and the ability to be amplified. Traphagen now offers two hybrid models, including his six- or seven-string Nylon Jazz, as well as a copy of the 1982 D'Aquisto guitar. He feels that the decreased tension of nylon, which produces less than half the string energy of steel, presents a real challenge in producing a truly responsive guitar. The delicate nature of a low-tension instrument makes it extremely difficult to produce, and even the slightest changes have a significant impact on the sound. Traphagen's hybrids are voiced very differently than his classical models. “Jazz players are looking for a quicker response with less sustain,” said Traphagen, who noted that the demand for hybrid guitars has remained fairly steady over the years and that the instruments are more accepted among South American jazz musicians.

Taylor Guitars

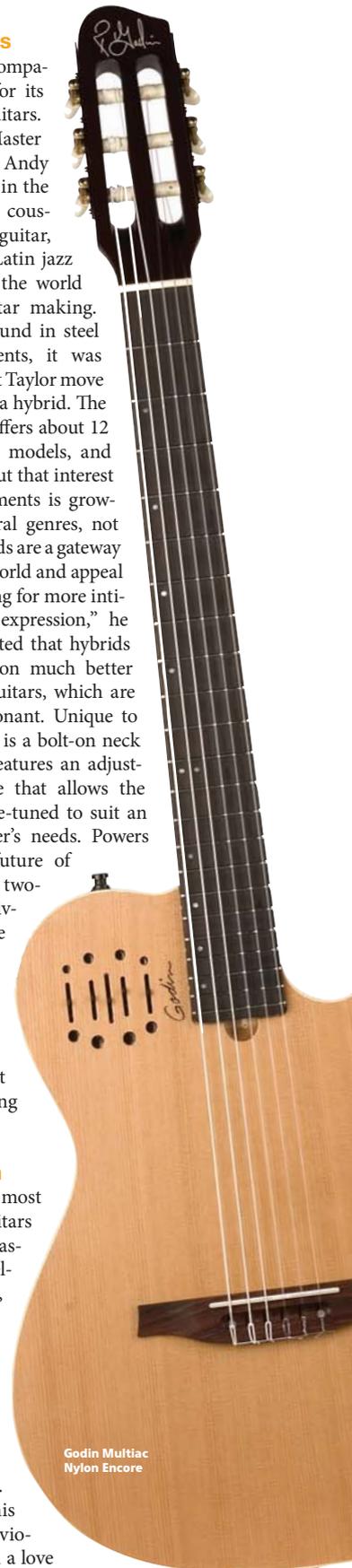
Taylor is a company best known for its steel-string guitars. According to Master Guitar Designer Andy Powers, interest in the ukulele, a close cousin to a nylon guitar, plus a love for Latin jazz drew him into the world of classical guitar making. With a background in steel string instruments, it was only natural that Taylor move into developing a hybrid. The company now offers about 12 different hybrid models, and Powers points out that interest in these instruments is growing across several genres, not just jazz. “Hybrids are a gateway into the nylon world and appeal to players looking for more intimacy in their expression,” he said. Powers noted that hybrids take amplification much better than classical guitars, which are usually too resonant. Unique to Taylor's hybrids is a bolt-on neck design, which features an adjustable neck angle that allows the guitar to be fine-tuned to suit an individual player's needs. Powers said that the future of the hybrid is a two-way street driven by both the skill of the guitar builder and the creativity of the player. “Slow, steady evolution is what sticks in the long run,” he said.

Murray Kuun

Whereas most crossover guitars are a hybrid of classical and steel-string flat tops, South Africa's Murray Kuun has taken the road less traveled by offering a unique nylon-string archtop guitar. Combining his experience in violin making with a love for classical guitar, Kuun has developed the Archangel model, which combines traditional archtop design with a nylon instrument. Murray Kuun said he feels that the sound of nylon strings is perfect for jazz and



Cordoba Fusion 12



Godin Multiac Nylon Encore

noted that some of the advantages of the hybrid are its 14-fret neck and cutaway body. Interestingly, he builds his guitars to be played purely acoustic, without a pickup system. Kuun builds several classical models and points out that any of these can be offered as a hybrid. When asked to comment on why more jazz players have not adopted the hybrid, Kuun offered a one-word response: "Tradition."

Ari Lehtela

Ari Lehtela of Lehtela Guitar Craft began his career building semi-hollow electric guitars. With a desire to build an instrument for Latin jazz

players and inspired by Benedetto's nylon arch-top, he created the Violão carved-top nylon guitar. Lehtela, who has never been interested in building traditional classical guitars, noticed the lack of carved-top nylon instruments in the market, prompting him to develop his own arch-top design. He noted the difficulty of building a low-tension carved instrument. "The challenge is to find the right balance between strength and resonance," he said. "Character of sound comes first, and volume and projection are second." He also pointed out that although his guitars are amplified, piezo technology is still lacking and often the electronics are not capable of truly capturing the

tone of the wood in a guitar. "The music itself is just as much of a hybrid as the instruments being built to meet the players demand," he said. "Often, the music dictates the need for something not built to any specific tradition."

George S. Leach

George S. Leach of the Phoenix Guitar Company has been building guitars for 25 years and first had the idea of a nylon hybrid in 1967. "I wanted a crossover guitar for myself because the transition between classical and steel-string was difficult," he said. Frustrated by a lack of availability, Leach introduced his first OM hybrid in 1994.



Phoenix Nylon String OM



The Domette by Daniel Siaman



The Dolphin by Theo Scharpach



Toru Nittano
Model-T Jazz

He noted that producing a responsive hybrid took quite a bit of experimentation, since nylon strings generate a lot less energy, making it a challenge to get a good tone. Leach is one of the select few builders who designs his hybrids specifically for acoustic use, and his extensive experience with concert classical guitars has given him a unique perspective. In commenting on the acceptance of

these guitars, Leach said that classical players are very conservative and resistant to change, but he finds that jazz players are more open to the concept. "If you play a wide range of music, then you will probably be drawn to a hybrid guitar," he said.

Rick Turner

Rick Turner of Rick Turner Guitars comes to



The Violão
by Ari Lehtela

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the hybrid table with strong credentials in the rock world. Starting his career building solidbody electrics and winding his own pickups, Turner has worked for Gibson, Alembic and even the Grateful Dead. Turner introduced his first nylon thinline electric guitar in 1991 and now offers a hybrid version as part of his Renaissance line. His philosophy is that amplification and construction are absolutely locked together and can't be separated. "My instruments are vehicles for the amplification system, and players are using my hybrid guitar to produce a hybrid tone," he said. Turner designs his own pickup systems, unlike many builders who rely on after-market amplification. He said

that hybrid guitars make nylon more accessible to a wider range of players, but due to a conservative market and lack of familiarity, he does not see them becoming a fad anytime soon.

Daniel Slaman

Daniel Slaman of Slaman Guitars in the Netherlands built his first nylon-string guitar at age 19 and has been hooked ever since. Slaman cites his love for music along with a fascination for wood as his driving forces as a luthier. Slaman's Dome hybrid is a truly unique instrument in that it features a top made of thin wood that is slowly forced into the arched "dome" shape by a bracing

system. "I had the archtop jazz player in mind when designing this instrument, which feels just like a 16-inch steel string archtop and not like a classical," he said. The Dome, and the smaller Domette, are designed to respond well both acoustically and with amplification, and most players use a mix of the two when performing. When asked about the future of hybrids, Slaman responded, "I am pretty confident that we will hear more nylon-string guitars in jazz in the future."

Godin Guitars

The hybrid concept is nothing new to Godin Guitars. Since the very beginning, Godin has focused on building instruments that work well on stage, and the company's very first guitar, the Acousticaster, was a crossover between a solidbody electric and steel-string acoustic. Godin introduced its first nylon electric back in 1990 and now offers 11 distinct hybrid models in its Multiac line. According to Mario Biferali, sales and marketing manager, the line grew out of necessity and the challenges of amplifying a classical guitar for stage use. "Nylon is not limited to classical players anymore, and amplification has opened the door," he said. Godin's hybrids have found a nice middle ground and will appeal to both electric and acoustic players. In terms of the market, Biferali pointed out that it is exploding for Godin, with nylon Multiacs actually outselling steel. "Our hybrid guitars are being used for hybrid music," he concluded.

Cordoba Guitars

Cordoba Guitars was founded with both feet firmly planted in the classical guitar world and with a mission to provide an affordable yet playable classical instrument. According to Kim White, who's in charge of national accounts, sales and marketing for Cordoba, the company entered the hybrid market in 2008 with its Fusion series, which has grown to include six models and is geared toward the gigging musician. "Our mission is to make the nylon-string easier to play and more accessible to players used to steel-string acoustic or electric guitars," White said. She pointed out that there are more steel-string players migrating over to nylon hybrids than classical musicians, who tend to be resistant to the concept. White also pointed out that the appeal of hybrids is growing, with more professional guitarists looking for expanded options. "Nylon strings change the way you play and that changes the way you make music," she said. "It opens up a whole new world of possibilities."

Toru Nittono

Toru Nittono of Nittono Guitars began his career in Japan building solidbody electric guitars. After relocating to the United States in 1981, he began moving into hollow and semi-hollow instruments and later branched out into archtops and flattops. When asked what motivated him to build a hybrid, Nittono responded, "I always liked nylon tone, but I couldn't find a comfortable guitar, so I built one." Nittono's Model-T Jazz electric nylon was released in 2005 and features a semi-hollow chambered body with an arched top. Basically a cross between a nylon and electric gui-

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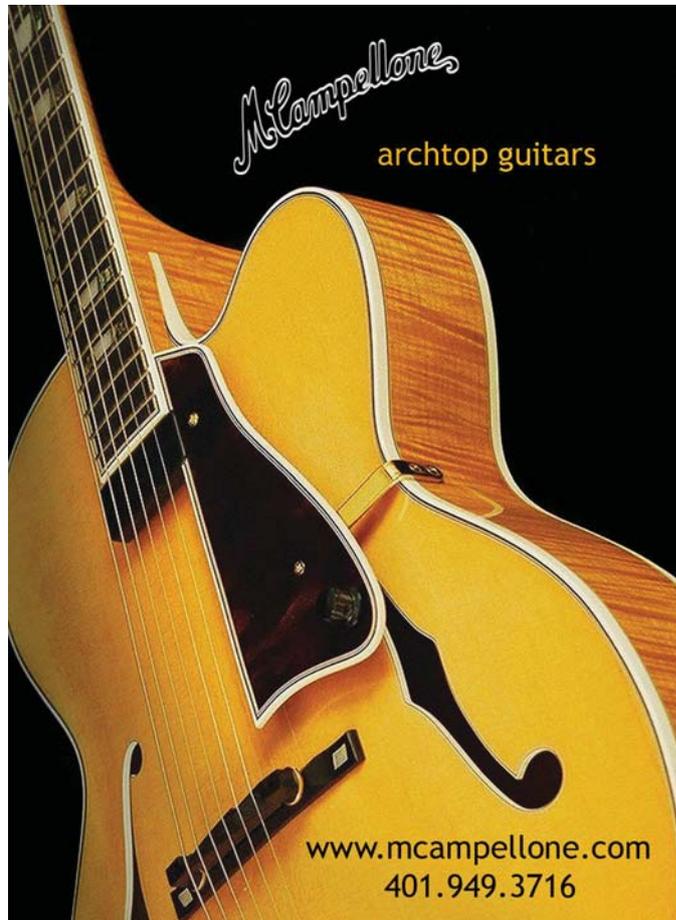
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Duke Traphagen
Nylon Jazz



tar, these hybrids are designed for the specific purpose of producing tone through an amp; they are not intended to be played acoustically. Described as an electric guitar feel with nylon tone, Nittono's guitars have caught the interest of jazz fusion players. He finds that his clients utilize both fingerstyle techniques and picks on his guitars, and an internal midrange adjustment actually allows the guitar to be fine-tuned to each player's specific preference. In terms of the market, Nittono said he believes that demand for hybrids is improving but it still represents a small portion of the overall market.

Mario Beauregard

Montreal's Beauregard Guitars has been into jazz and archtop guitars since the very beginning. Mario Beauregard, who considers himself to be an acoustic guy first, pointed out that there are two types of builders: assemblers and acousticians. His offerings include a line of standard jazz boxes as well as flattop acoustics and thinlines. Setting out to design a nylon guitar for professional jazz players, Beauregard started to develop his Nylon Jazz hybrids in the late 1990s and began building them in the early 2000s. Beauregard pointed out that voicing was the most critical consideration for his instruments, as he felt that other electric acoustics sounded a little nasal. Commenting on the transition from jazz guitars to flattops, he said, "You are always dealing with physics, and archtops, which rely on down pressure, are very different from flattops, which utilize pull pressure and tend to be more fragile." Beauregard offers three distinct versions of his Nylon Jazz hybrid, including a full-bod-

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Headstock of Toru Nittono's Model-T Jazz



Renaissance Hybrid by Rick Turner

ied acoustic arched-back design and two thinline versions. Beauregard noted that on nylon instruments the balance of factors can be very tricky and he is constantly defining the limits and then pushing them while still maintaining as much control as possible. Beauregard said that interest in hybrids is growing, particularly among younger players, but added that nylon has a very specific voice and is not for everyone. "When the musicians tell me that the instrument inspires them

to go somewhere else in a musical sense, I know I have done my job," he said.

Theo Scharpach

Theo Scharpach of Scharpach Master Guitars has always held a love for nylon instruments. Inspired by the Netherlands' thriving South American music scene of the 1970s, he began building nylon guitars as well as several traditional South American instruments such as the cha-

rango and the vihuela. It was the playing of virtuoso musicians who used nylon guitars in a non-classical setting that prompted Scharpach to build his first hybrid, which he prefers to call a crossover. "I was inspired by the music of Duck Baker, Laurindo Almeida and Charlie Byrd," he said. "I just loved their way of playing the nylon string guitar that was different from the classical guitar music. Duck Baker especially played that guitar in a unique way. That the strings were buzzing the frets would be unacceptable for a classical player, but it became almost a trademark of Duck Baker, and part of his recognizable style." Scharpach's Dolphin concert model is the end result of years of experimentation and features a fully acoustic design with many unique elements like its unusual soundhole design and an extended fingerboard that allows for a 27-fret neck. Scharpach describes the Dolphin as a nylon-string guitar that fills the gap between a classical and a steel-string. He noted that it is often delivered with an amplification system using a high-end pickup and/or internal mic for performing live concerts. "It is made for those that are not from a classical background and gives you the brutal sound of a flamenco but with enough sweetness to play any Brazilian bossa," he said. "It is an easily accessible guitar for those who did not study for five years to develop the correct left- and right-hand technique. Therefore, we offer custom neck dimensions, playability and custom string heights when taking orders." Scharpach also adds that a high-end crossover instrument like the Dolphin should sound good when played fingerstyle or with a pick, something that not all nylon guitars are capable of. When asked about the demand for these instruments, he said, "It has always been there."

When considering the wide range of luthiers and manufacturers that offer nylon hybrid instruments, it becomes obvious that their influences, philosophies and backgrounds are just as much of a hybrid as the guitars they build. Most seem to agree that interest in these guitars is growing, but certainly not exploding, and that market awareness combined with increased availability will help drive demand in the future. To many open-minded players, the hybrid represents an exciting new voice that expands their creative potential and takes them to an entirely new place.

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