

# The Signature of Jazz Guitar

## An Interview with Archtop Luthier Bob Benedetto

Interview by Charles H. Chapman

**I**n the world of mainstream jazz, the stringed instrument of choice has historically been the archtop guitar. From the jazz innovators of the 1920s to the young lions of today, the archtop guitar still reigns supreme.

This eclectic instrument is distinctly American; the first carved-top guitars started to appear in the late 1800s in the United States. John D'Angelico, revered as the first true master of the archtop guitar, elevated the craft to an art form throughout the first half of the 20th century. He was extremely prolific and built approximately 900 archtop guitars before his untimely death on September 1, 1964, at the young age of 59.

D'Angelico's apprentice, Jimmy D'Aquisto, picked up the fallen torch and continued the master's legacy. In 1995, while at work with the Fender Custom Shop on its Fender D'Aquisto archtop model, Jimmy also died unexpectedly at the age of 59, leaving the archtop throne vacant.

Today, when speaking with top jazz players and collectors about the heir to the archtop master's throne, there is one name that universally emerges—Robert Benedetto. Even before D'Aquisto's death, the beauty, functionality and sweet tone of his archtop masterpieces made Benedetto the choice of many elite jazz guitarists including Jimmy Bruno, Bucky and John Pizzarelli, Howard Alden and Kenny Burrell. Bob's La Cremona Azzurra guitar was the centerpiece of the celebrated Blue Guitar exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC.

Widely regarded as the last of the "Old World" jazz guitar makers, Benedetto has from his very first guitar focused solely on the jazz guitar and its players. Highly innovative and intuitive, over the course of 31 years he has acquired an unrivaled depth of understanding of the archtop guitar.

Benedetto's innovative solutions to design and construction problems have been one of his hallmarks. He was the first to make the solid ebony tailpiece with Sacconi connector. He pioneered the use of exotic burl veneers on the headstock and was the originator of the honey blond finish. His innovative, unadorned archtop models started a trend in acoustic archtops which has been copied by many guitar builders.

While his unique approach to the archtop guitar has lifted him to the summit of the jazz guitar market, Benedetto is not the type of craftsman to guard his technical secrets jealously. Quite the contrary. His landmark book, *Making an Archtop Guitar*, and his instructional video, *Archtop Guitar Design and Construction*, lay bare in meticulous detail both his methodologies and the various insights he has gained over decades of experience.

Bob Benedetto has now joined forces with Guild as an archtop consultant and will be sharing his own guitar designs with Guild so that the Benedetto archtop can be built by the craftsmen at Guild's Custom Shop in Nashville. This is definitely an exciting situation for everyone involved—especially the guitarists of tomorrow who will now be able to avail themselves of the artistry that only a few could afford in the past.

*Guild Gallery: Why would the world's most successful archtop maker want to become involved with a major guitar manufacturer?*

Bob Benedetto: It's the dream of every individual guitar maker to want to expand his horizons, to have his name and work go further than just one person can do alone. Joining forces with a respected large manufacturer fulfills that dream, to the benefit of both parties. But, truthfully, I wouldn't do it with just any manufacturer. I've always had a great deal of respect for Guild.

*GG: Why did you specifically want your name associated with Guild?*

BB: Guild is the perfect company for me to be associated with. They always made wonderful instruments. Years ago, during my repair days, I would often have one on the bench and thought, "If I could only get into

that factory, I'd love to fine-tune these guitars." Now, I'll have that opportunity and the timing couldn't be better. The company has had its ups and downs for many years, but they held on. They have a very talented and dedicated staff. Plus, Guild and I have something in common—from the very beginning, we both started by making archtops. Now, with Fender behind Guild, there's nothing but a bright future for us all. I feel very safe knowing that Fender, with its long, successful history and revered image, is at the helm.

*GG: How did this union come about?*

BB: Good timing—that's everything. Fender obviously purchased Guild because they knew it was a good company, with lots of potential. One of the major objectives was to go further with the archtop line. With a little encouragement from one Charles Chapman [laughs], I received a call from Bill Acton last December. One word led to another and before I knew it we were working on a contract to not only update and improve the Artist Award and Stuart models, but also to make Benedetto's at the Guild Custom Shop in Nashville.

*GG: Excuse my impertinence, but many in the lutherie community may accuse you of "selling out" and joining forces with Guild for monetary reasons. How do you respond to this?*

BB: You may be surprised, but we've heard nothing but cheers from the lutherie community. By and large, we individual makers, although competitive at times, are a very supportive group. We all know what it's like to struggle and all share the same dream. And believe me, it's not only about money. It's much bigger than that. The reason I'm so excited about this arrangement is because I'm being given the opportunity to go further. With Guild's support, I'll be able to make my own line of guitars more accessible in the marketplace, plus I'll have time to do R&D work that's years overdue. There are so many things that could be done to improve the archtop guitar, and now I'll be able to do them, something I'd probably never have the time to do on my own.

*GG: What is the impetus behind Guild's decision to have you upgrade the Artist Award and Stuart models?*

