

Jazz Guitarist and Singer Pete Pancrazi Interviews George Leach and Diana Huber of the Phoenix Guitar Company

Pete: How did you both get started in guitar making?

George: I got started in 1988, after a local repair shop did a lousy job on one of my guitars. I figured I could do better than that, since I had done a lot of model making and woodworking, so I bought every book I could find on guitar repair. I started doing repairs for friends, like pickup installations, crack repairs, etc, and it built up from there. In 1989, I decided to build my first guitar. A good friend sent someone he knew over to look at it, and he ordered one. Pretty soon, another guitarist ordered another one, and all of a sudden, I was in business making guitars. I never had any plan to go in this direction—I built a guitar on a whim, and it just happened. In 1992, I went to Peter's Valley Craft Center in Northwest New Jersey, where they offered a week long class in guitarmaking, taught by Dick Boak and Bill Cumpiano. I couldn't pass up the opportunity to go meet these two guys and build a guitar under their supervision—even though I had already built several by that time. In 1993, I got invited back to help teach the class with Frank Finocchio—and really enjoyed teaching and working with people. I also took Tom Ribbecke's archtop class in 1996, and Dale Unger and Frank Finocchio's archtop class in 1997 to learn all I could about archtops, because that was a direction I always wanted to go.

Finally, in 2001, I decided to teach my first guitarmaking class, here in the Phoenix area, and have been doing it ever since.

Diana: I was in that first class George taught—over at the local Woodcraft store, then in Tempe. I had wanted to do this for a long time, but the opportunity hadn't really been there before. I checked into the Roberto-Venn school, and though it had a good reputation, it was a full time school. I couldn't just quit my job and study guitar making. George's class was taught on the weekends, which made it possible for me and the other students to attend. I continued working with George on weekends, helping with classes, making jigs, etc, and finished my first guitar (not counting the one we made in class), a Nylon string OM, in 2003.



Base priced 17" archtop discussed, strictly acoustic with no binding.

Pete: So, you're now located in Scottsdale, Why that location?

George: A couple of reasons: First, the Phoenix/Scottsdale area has a great up and coming jazz scene.

Several schools in the area, including ASU, Mesa Community College, Glendale Community College, etc . have excellent jazz programs, and are putting out some great players. We're also in pretty good company. Fender has one of their major sites (I think it's for R&D) here in the Scottsdale area. And there's a new musical instrument museum that's nearly complete in North Phoenix. I can't wait to check it out.

Also, we wanted a building big enough to work on our guitars in—but also big enough to teach our classes in, and we got a good deal on this location. Being in Arizona, we don't have the kind of overhead that one might have, being in some other major metropolitan area, but we're close enough to California, to go over to the NAMM show, or to Healdsburg.

Pete: What about the weather and dryness here? How does that affect how you build your guitars?

Diana: We have to keep our shop humidified, since we don't know where a customer will order a guitar from. We have one in New Zealand, and in many different states here in the US, as well as Europe, so we try to educate our customers about the evils of letting your guitar get too dry, and keeping a good humidifier in the case. Taking your guitar out to practice, or do a gig isn't a big deal, but keeping it back in the case is the thing to do—not only for humidity, but for other disasters, like having the guitar fall off a stand. A lot of customers like having their guitar out on a stand—and some of our highest dollar repairs, besides cracks, is repairing broken necks, from guitars falling off stands.

Pete: OK, so let's cut to the chase here...There are guitars that you put in a glass case and just admire, and there are guitars meant to be taken out 200 times a year, and be used on gigs. What do you offer to a working jazz guitar player who doesn't want to



Fancier 17" archtop discussed, with wood bindings on the body and f holes and a single pickup.



15" archtop in natural sunburst with plastic bindings on the f holes and body and a single floating pickup.



Nylon string OM with a cedar top and koa sides and back with a sound port on the upper bout.

take out a second mortgage on his house?

George: We want to be making guitars that will be played. We try to price our guitars in the range where the gigging guitarist can afford them, and will be willing to take them out and play them on a regular basis.

Pete: So, what are the prices for an archtop?

Diana: Our price starts at \$3000 for the most basic model and this includes a single cutaway. This is a strictly acoustic model with no bindings—and a great sound. For \$100 you can add plastic bindings, and another \$100 gets you bound f-holes. \$250 gets a pickup (either a floating or built in Kent Armstrong), so for under \$3500 you get a fully bound, single pickup jazz guitar, with volume and tone controls. This guitar has a natural finish, so you can add a sunburst, wood bindings, or a second pickup by paying extra, but that basic gigging guitar can cost just under \$3500.00, which seems to be what our customers have wanted.

Pete: Wow...that's a great price. I assume this is a laminated top and back?

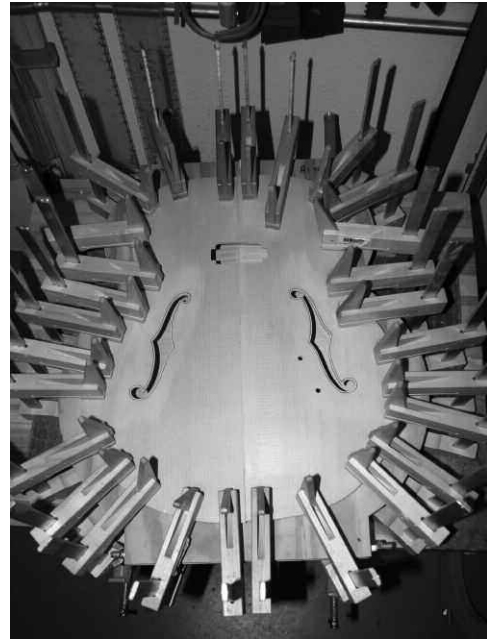
Diana: The tops and backs are pressed. And they're solid spruce and maple.

Pete: What's the advantage of pressed solid woods versus laminated?

Diana: We feel that there's a significant tone advantage to solid woods over plywood, since we can put a recurve in the top and back.

Pete: That would really be apparent in a recording setting, when you mic the guitar.

Diana: Exactly. In addition, we're able to save money over carving our tops and backs using this method, because we start out with 3/16 to 1/4 in. thick material and steam press it. We can certainly carve the tops and backs, but then we start out with material about 1 in. thick, so we pay significantly more for the material, then spend a lot of our own time carving it. We think using the pressed tops and backs are the wave of the future, since it's much greener than wasting so much material carving tops and backs. Also, we've heard no discernable difference in the sound. We've gotten an excellent, powerful sound out of the pressed tops and backs, and carving the recurve and braces is where the real tone and volume are brought out. Now, if a customer wants a carved top and back, we can do it, but not for \$3000.00. One of our guitars with a fully carved top and back starts at \$5000.00.



Here's the guitar body, back already glued to the sides, and the top is being glued down. This is going to be a single pickup archtop with a builtin pickup.



This is the guitar body basically done. Binding has been glued on and bridge and tailpiece are shown.



Headstock inlay standard on all Phoenix Guitar Co. guitars. This one needs to be sanded out.



Diana sands the underside of a brace as she fits the brace to the contour of the top prior to gluing the braces down.



Diana working on the final neck profile with a file.



The underside of the top, braces mostly carved, still some sanding to do.

Pete: Where did the idea of the Nylon String OM come from—and exactly what is it?

George: I used to play a classical all the time, and go back and forth between it and an archtop. The necks were so different, that the transition was always awkward. I also just thought that a classical neck was simply too wide, and I wanted one with a narrower neck, and a cutaway for easier access up the neck. In 1994, we made the first nylon string OM, with a 14 fret neck, a cutaway option, a 1 7/8 inch nut, a radiused fingerboard, and a great classical sound. Over the years, we have had several changes evolve with the guitar, and now we have an extremely comfortable instrument, used by our customers for everything from jazz to classical music, and it's one of our best sellers.

Pete: What about the prices for the Nylon String OM?

George: The base price is also \$3000, but the price breaks down a little differently. A cutaway on this guitar is \$500, and plastic bindings are included, so either \$3000 or \$3500 gets you the basic guitar (with or without cutaway), and wood bindings, a pickup, etc will cost extra.

Pete: So, up to now, you've been a custom shop, where you make most any kind of guitar, from steel string to classical to archtop. Is that your plan moving forward?

George: Well, we will always look into a custom order if a customer wants one, but we plan to start focusing more on our nylon strings and archtops. Our classical and our nylon string OM's are so similar in so many ways, that it makes sense to continue with both. Also, our archtops have so many similarities-regardless of the size or depth, so we'll continue to focus on those. Our steel strings will more likely take a back seat. We're very proud of our steel string guitars, but most everybody out there makes a good steel string, and there's a lot more involved in making a great classical or a great archtop, so we'll be continuing to carve our niche out in these areas.

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