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Phoenix Guitar Company Profile

Arizona shop offers custom guitars, repairs, and lutherie courses.

By Russell Letson

The Phoenix Guitar Co. of Scottsdale, Arizona, is a small custom shop that not only hand-builds, repairs, and restores guitars but also offers classes in the craft of lutherie. This triple focus is essential to both the business model and the working styles of shop partners George Leach and Diana Huber.

Leach started repairing and building guitars in the late 1980s while still an engineer at Intel, and he started the first incarnation of the Phoenix Guitar Co. in 1994. Before and after opening the shop, he took classes from such master builders as William Cumpiano, Tom Ribbecke, Dale Unger, and Frank Finocchio. In 2001, Leach started offering classes of his own, and Huber, a telecom-software tester with an interest in lutherie, was one of his first students. She soon started helping out with the teaching, and when Leach retired from Intel in 2006, she joined him as a business partner in a reconstituted Phoenix Guitar Company in a new, fully redesigned shop.

Leach and Huber can each handle any task in the shop, a situation that suits both of them. "We both like being able to work on different things," says Leach. "I focus on most of the repairs, Diana is able to focus more on building, and we both do the classes." For her part, after years in software, Huber likes working with her hands and producing something tangible. A guitar, she says, is "playable art. It's not going to just sit there and collect dust."

Phoenix builds three families of archtop and flattop guitars and offers its customers many choices of woods: maple, mahogany, Indian or Brazilian rosewood, walnut, koa, ziricote, cocobolo, or myrtle back and sides and spruce (Sitka, Adirondack, or Engelmann), red cedar, or koa tops. The company's steel-string flattops, which start at \$2,500, including case, come in 00, 000/OM (15 inches wide), and grand concert (16 inches wide) sizes and are aimed at fingerstyle players. The basic flattop design is strongly Martin-esque, though Leach points out that Phoenix braces are thinner and less scalloped than those of a typical Martin in order to get the kind of light, responsive top he prefers.

Phoenix's most unusual and innovative design is the Nylon OM, which starts at \$2,750. Developed by Leach in 1994, the model combines steel-string and classical elements: 00-, 000/OM-, or 000-size body (earlier examples were OM size), 14-fret neck, asymmetrical fan bracing, and a 1⁷/₈ inch radiused fretboard. The guitar is available with scale lengths of 24.9 inches, 25.4 inches, or 26 inches. Leach prefers the longest scale, which is similar to the 660 mm scale used on many concert classical guitars, saying that it "gives the guitar some real punch while remaining very well balanced." The resulting instrument appeals to players who are looking for a nylon-string that feels like a steel-string, and Leach says that the Nylon OM is "a terrific jazz guitar." Phoenix also builds a more conventional classical model (starting at \$3,150) that shares the Nylon OM's bracing pattern and radiused fretboard but otherwise follows traditional classical design formulas.



A Phoenix Grand Concert with an optional sideport.

Phoenix offers three sizes of archtops: 15- and 17-inch “standard” models and the 14-inch Baby. The 15- and 17-inch versions (starting at \$3,000) use modern, X-braced cutaway designs and are available with optional floating or inset pickups. Instead of carved tops and backs, these models have solid pressed Sitka spruce tops and flamed maple backs manufactured by German tonewood supplier Fritz Kollitz and then thinned and refined by Phoenix. This process allows the company to use much less wood than what is required for carving a top from a thick billet. A carved top is, however, available as a custom option on the 15- and 17-inch models, and it is standard on the 14-inch Baby Phoenix.

The second leg of the Phoenix Guitars business model, repair and restoration, suits Leach’s analytical, almost scholarly approach to lutherie. Even with years of experience behind him, he says that restoration projects can be “a little bit frightening,” citing a recent neck reset on a 1973 Mossman dreadnought. Mossman’s unusual neck joint, a combination of bolts and a glued-in mortise-and-tenon joint, required Leach to learn about a new repair technique and reach out to someone who had experience with this type of procedure. “Getting that neck off was a real challenge,” says Leach. “I called up [luthier] Scott Baxendale, who had owned Mossman [the company] for a while and had done a lot of neck resets. He talked to me and sent me some photographs, and all of a sudden it didn’t look like so big a deal any more. So we dove into it, and the neck came off.”

The final leg of the Phoenix business tripod is teaching, which provides a refreshing mix of activities for the proprietors as well as a steady income stream that keeps the lights on. Both individual and group instruction is offered, and in either case the student is guided through the entire building process and walks out with a ready-to-play Phoenix-designed guitar. And the guitar and craft skills aren’t the only products of the class. “Probably the biggest piece of attitude adjustment for our students is getting them over their panic about making a mistake,” Leach says, “and making them realize that almost everything can be fixed—almost.”

Phoenix Guitar Co.
7302 E. Helm Dr., Suite 2005
Scottsdale, AZ 85260
(480) 664-6315
phoenixguitarco.com

Photos credit, Phoenix Guitar Co.

PHOENIX GUITAR MAKING CLASS

The Phoenix Guitar Company’s 1,600-square-foot shop was designed from the start to accommodate students, and classes are available in one-on-one and group formats. With concentrated individual instruction, a guitar can be built in 14 to 16 days, but a guitar without finish can be built in as little time as a week (Phoenix can perform the finishing process without the student present). Group classes, which are limited to six students, take place on 16 or 17 consecutive Saturdays. The shop supplies all materials and tools, and for its most recent workshops the cost came to \$460 (tax included) for materials and \$1,625 for tuition, with additional charges for wood substitutions and upgrades (for example, \$200 for a cutaway bent by the instructors).



Phoenix’s Nylon OM.



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