

# LUTHIER MICHAEL GREENFIELD

by Ed Benson



*EB: Tell me a little bit about your background. Are you a player, also?*

MG: Yes, I've been playing for 37 years. I started as a rock and blues player; lately I've been into jazz and fusion.

*EB: Do you think that helps you in terms of building?*

MG: Oh, absolutely.

*EB: Did you apprentice with anybody?*

MG: Tom Ribbecke. He's a brilliant, innovative maker and a good friend. I learned how to build archtop guitars with Tom, and I'm also really blessed and fortunate to have a wonderful network of talented friends to call on who are some of the great names in our craft.

*EB: When did you start building on your own?*

MG: I've been building full-time for about 10 years, and spent 20 years doing guitar repair and restoration.

*EB: Are you still doing repairs?*

MG: Not anymore. I stopped about 4 years ago.

*EB: How many guitars do you build a year?*

MG: I build about 15 or 16 a year now.

*EB: Mostly archtops?*

MG: I would say probably about 30%...about a third of them are archtops. You know, archtops are the last thing that I added to my mix about 5 years ago.

*EB: According to your website, you do it all. I was surprised, because most guys building archtops build archtops; that's it. You're doing classical and flat tops and archtops--everything--even 8-string.*

MG: I started off building steel string guitars because that's where the big market is for handmade guitars. Then, after several years, I started building classical guitars because I had a demand for them. This taught me a lot about guitar making; that's where the challenge is (it's really hard to make a great sounding classical guitar). But once I had my woodworking and guitar-making chops together, I started making archtop guitars because that's really where my love of the instrument is. I'm a guitar junkie, a jazz fanatic, and I love the instrument. It's all guitar-making, although all three instruments are really quite different. Look at talents like John Monteleone who builds archtops, steel string and fabulous mandolins (I would love to study with John someday...). And Steve Grimes, Linda Manzer and Mario Beauregard are great guitarmakers. Linda and Mario are both good friends and mentors, actually.

*EB: Do you hand-carve everything, or do you use a machine?*

MG: I'm hand-carving. I thought about CNC technology for a while, but I'm not doing it. It's kind of the same thing as if I had a duplicating carver, but much more accurate. Jimmy D'Aquisto used to use a duplicating carver. It's just to waste the initial material. I hate using that term, but that's what we say about how we get rid of all the stuff that doesn't look like the final arched plate. It's really all about voicing and that last 10%, not even, really that last 5%. That's when you fine-tune and finish the plate's graduations. Bringing in a carver just isn't practical for me, as I only make 4-5 archtops a year. The other thing is that many of my friends' elbows are shot after years of carving. You never hear that?

*EB: No I haven't heard that yet, but I can see why.*

MG: Yeah, I know a number of people who just...I guess it doesn't affect some people, and some it does. So I just figure, you know what? I love guitarmaking so much that when I'm 80, I still want to be able to make guitars.

*EB: Where are most of your woods from?*

MG: They're from all over. I do use a lot of domestic woods from North America.

*EB: Still using some European in the high-end guitars?*

MG: For the high-end, or to achieve a specific result. I do have some lovely European stuff, and I've been talking directly with some people in the Swiss Alps and Germany, because my standards are very high. Everybody says their standards are high but I'm really particular about it. Over the years, I have developed great relationships with my wood suppliers. At the beginning, they send you what they send you. After many, many times of my saying, "No, I'm sorry, you have to take it back," now I'm at a point where I'll call and they'll say, "You know what, I don't have what you're looking for right now." But when something wowie-zowie does come in, they'll call me and say, "Hey, I've got something fantastic that you're going to love." I also have...not a lot, but I have a few unbelievable sets of Adirondack spruce for archtops.

*EB: Do you think most players would notice the difference in a guitar made with European wood versus domestic? Can you really hear the difference?*

MG: Well, yes and no. A good piece of wood is a good piece of wood. And I would rather have a great piece of one species over a so-so piece of another. More important than the piece of wood is how it's worked. There's no question that domestic [Sitka] spruce, does sound different from the European spruces. European spruce can be a bit more open and explosive, depending on how it's worked. It tends to be more complex in its tonal range, whereas the domestic stuff can be more raw and darker sounding. But again, it really depends on how the plates are carved, how high or low the arch is, where the arch begins and ends, how far the recurve is in from the edges, the size of and where the soundholes are placed--all of these things. You know, whether it's x-braced or parallel-braced, scale length, neck angle, string type and gauge. All of those things will affect the voice of the instrument far more than just the species of wood.

*EB: Is there any one body size that most everybody wants?*

MG: That little 15" guitar over there represents about half of my archtop mix, but it depends on the year. The inspiration for it, although it's a very different instru-

ment, was the GB10 and the GB20.

*EB: Oh, the old George Benson?*

MG: Yeah, and you know, guys like playing those instruments for two reasons. Especially if they're out gigging, and just sitting in their living room .not everybody likes to climb on board a big 17" guitar for the evening. It's nice to have this little jazz machine in your arms, and you don't have to schlep around a big jazz box. It's like driving a little 2-seat sports car! The other thing is, small bodies like that are extremely quick to respond, so if you're a bop player you get that distinctive pop off the pick attack of each note. And that's largely attributed to the small body.

*EB: You have a different type of bridge, don't you?*

MG: Yes, my full contact bridge. I offer the regular adjustable thumb-wheel bridge and I also offer a full-contact bridge where the entire saddle is in full contact with the foot of the bridge. It's inspired by the D'Aquisto thing, although it's not at all like his. His was a brilliant, elegant design, fully adjustable by the player, with the wedge under the saddle. Mine is quasi-non-adjustable, like the saddle on an acoustic guitar. For my clients who gig a lot and travel extensively, I recommend the thumb-wheel bridge; it's easily adjustable by the player. But you know what? With the full-contact bridge--just like any acoustic guitar--if the guitar isn't going to be touring a lot, after the first six months, things settle in and don't change, so you rarely adjust your saddle height.

*EB: With all the competition out there today, how does a builder differentiate himself? It's got to be difficult.*

MG: That's a good question. We're all more or less doing the same thing. Most makers these days are basically building Johnny Smiths. A very select few do it much better than everyone else, and that's what I'm striving for. I always learn something new from each client and each guitar. This guitar is better than the last, and the next one will be better than this. The guitars are constantly evolving. I am also constantly reading, researching, attending seminars, master classes, symposia and learning from my friends and colleagues, many of whom are the luminaries of our craft. I try to visit other makers' shops and to spend time with them to learn a few new tricks and techniques. I think the challenge is to take some of these ideas, the ones that will work with the way you build, or the type of instrument you are trying to create and make them your own.

The challenge is not to simply reproduce what they're doing, but to take that idea and add it to your own arsenal of weapons, and have your guitars look and sound like your guitars.

I see myself as a custom maker and have consciously decided to limit my yearly production, rather than produce more guitars. I try to take the time to make each guitar the very best one I am capable of. No two are alike; each one is carefully crafted for an individual artist. While I have basic models, many parameters are variable in order to achieve a specific result. Some of my colleagues are somewhat locked-in regarding those variables because of the tooling or technologies they have employed in order to produce more instruments and keep their prices competitive. As I am doing everything by hand and one at a time, it is easier for me to craft an instrument that will best address the specific needs and playing style of a given musician.

Another big advantage is my being a player. I used to play pro and have done 20 years of repair, restoration and lots and lots of fret work and set-up. Every player who sits down at my table at a guitar show and plays an archtop, or any guitar for that matter, always comments: "Oh, man this feels great." About seven or eight years ago, just before I was ready to exhibit at my first guitar show, I asked Linda Manzer for advice on exhibiting." She told me that the guitars have to be set up "killer," and they have to look stunning. At a show you can't hear anything properly anyway. But if it looks great, they will come to your table to try it, and when that guy picks up the guitar and it just feels right in his hands, it's sold.

*EB: I agree with that 100%. How long does it take to get a guitar from you?*

MG: My wait is currently 3 years. I changed my ordering policies in January of 2005, and my guitars will be available through a few world-class dealerships. All of the ordering information and my agents are listed on my website. And I do offer a 72 hour, money-back guarantee on custom orders. I spend a lot of time with people on the phone, trying to dial in exactly what it is that they want. No guitar has ever been returned, simply because it's just what they wanted. By the time I actually select the piece of wood and bring it over to the saw to cut it to rough shape, I have a mental picture of what the voice of that instrument is going to be. I built that guitar over there for Charlie Hunter....



*EB: I was going to ask you, how did that come about that 8-string guitar?*

MG: Well, that's what he plays. I actually met him here at the Montreal International Jazz Festival and we started talking about different things, and I asked, "Have you ever thought about doing this gig acoustic?" And he answered that as a matter of fact he had been. He and his wife had been talking about it a lot, and she would love him to start doing an acoustic thing. But who the hell could build a weirdo guitar like this? I told him "I will!"

*EB: How does he tune that thing?*

MG: The same as he tunes his other guitars. It's basically the top 5 strings of a standard guitar, which are tuned from low A to high E, and then the bottom 3 strings of a bass guitar...E, A, D. On his Novax guitars, he is playing through two sources. He has his bass strings-they are ribbon-wound strings, routed through a bass amp. And then the regular guitar strings go through a guitar amp. This guitar uses a single source D-TAR piezo film cable pickup, and is meant to be played like any other nylon-string guitar. The other thing he is doing lately is that he now tunes from F to F. Charlie really wants a strong fundamental. He was getting it when he used to play a 30" scale on the bass side, but the stretches were too much for him playing night after night. The 29" scale, although it's good, is a little short for his ears, so he tunes up a semi-tone and is much happier with the voice of the guitar. Charlie

has great ears and he just finds F to F works better for him.

*EB: What's the neck width at the nut?*

MG: Actually it's not that wide; it's 2-1/8" at the nut. His string spacing is extremely tight. I couldn't play that thing.

*EB: I'm amazed that anybody could play it.*

MG: Yeah, but that's all he's been doing. He's dedicated most of his adult life to learning how to play, and perfecting that particular instrument. He just opened the case, sat down with his new guitar, tore into it and says, "Man this is great but it's weird; it's going to take some getting used to" (no longer a thin electric guitar, this is a 4" deep classical guitar). Yeah, right! It didn't seem to me as though he was experiencing any trouble. I wish I was at even a fraction of the level where "he wasn't comfortable because it will take some getting used to" The guy is scary good!

***Editor's note: [Since the time of this interview, some new changes are taking place with Charlie Hunter's Changui model, Greenfield Guitar].***

MG: I want to tell all of your readers that Charlie's guitar is back in my shop. He is going 7-string! Yup...you heard it here first. He also wants to change the scale lengths of his fan, which means my making him a new neck, bridge, and re-topping the guitar. He told me that he will still keep the low E, A and D strings (like on a bass guitar) but will drop the high E string. So the guitar strings will be A D G and B. Charlie told me that he had been giving it a lot of thought and had figured out how to do everything he used to do, without the high string. He will also keep the same nut width and spacing at the bridge, which will make things a lot less cramped. He should have the guitar back before the end of the year....so stay tuned.

*EB: We talked about the guitar shows just for a minute. Do you think they're losing importance, based on what's happening with the internet?*

MG: Well, it depends on what sort of shows you mean. If you're talking about guitar shows from a vintage guitar point of view... the Long Island show, the Arlington show, all the other big shows-that's where you went to find old guitars and amps and parts, and to swap things. With EBay, it's all gone. The true vintage guitar show's a dinosaur. A lot of my clients who were dealers got out of the business several years ago. And a lot of this stuff

they're showing is new stuff; it's not even vintage stuff anymore. If you read vintage guitar magazines, you'll see the guitars they are listing have been there so long they have birthdays! There too, a lot of the guitars and other gear they are listing are new and boutique stuff. The vintage market is not like it used to be. But happily, a lot of those shows are transforming, being updated or replaced by acoustic guitar shows and guitar festivals, where small makers of fine handcrafted guitars are being shown. The market is changing. It is now very hip to own a hand-made guitar.



*EB: Did you make the St. Louis show this year?*

MG: No. There are so many shows now, and I can't be at all of them. I used to do 7-8 shows each year. Now I only do one or two. Doing the shows was very good for me earlier in my career, but I would lose close to 10 weeks of time in the shop. Between preparing guitars for the show, shipping guitars, traveling, exhibiting, tearing down and then recovering for a couple of days after each show, it was easily a week, sometimes more, away from my workbench per show. Luckily, I can't afford that sort of time away anymore, but it did get my name out there in the earlier years, and I learned a lot.

*EB: I just wonder how many people are walking around a show like that with the money to buy a guitar then and there.*

MG: If you look at the Long Island show or a festival like the Healdsburg Guitar Festival, which is predominantly a steel-string thing, or last summer, the Newport Guitar Festival, quite a few archtop makers show at these things. People come to these things with cash. That's where you can meet the name makers, talk to them, see and try their guitars. Many of those folks are there to buy a guitar, or to commission one. That's what those shows are really all about. I know a lot of times nobody's going to lay down \$8,000+ for a guitar because he looked at a picture over the internet. They have learned about your work, will have either played one of a friend's, or seen an endorsing artist who's playing one....

EB: *They want to get their hands on it...*

MG: That's it. They want to meet the maker. They want to talk to you in person; they want to get their hands on one. They play it, they hear it, and then they say, "Yeah, this is good."

EB: *Are you putting a pickup on the archtops? Or are they straight acoustic?*

MG: Well, they start off straight acoustic, and if they want a pickup on there, I'll do that. Most end up with a pickup.

EB: *Whose do you use? Kent Armstrong?*

MG: Yup. He's "the man."

EB: *Does he make anything special for you, or is it a stock pickup?*

MG: No, he winds them for each guitar, depending on what I want. Like, for instance, (and I have to be careful with this) I delivered a guitar to Pat Martino. And the reason I say I have to be careful with this is because he does own one of my guitars but he has his own signature series Gibson Model, which he endorses; he has a contract with them. I have a little blurb about him on my website, but I don't want to get him....

EB: *He's not an endorser, but you've made a guitar for him.*

MG: That's right, I just want everyone to understand, I don't want to get him into trouble.

EB: *No, I understand.*

MG: You know what Pat's sound is. So I called up Kent and I said, "Look, I'm making a guitar for Pat Martino; he really wants that dark sound," so he wound

the pickup accordingly. Naturally, it floored Pat. And I try to do that with all of the guitars. Some guys want a single coil, some, a mini humbucker, some PAF style. Like I said, these are custom guitars. Whatever the client needs, within reason...



Leveling a back



Scraping maple

EB: *Now I noticed on the website, you're doing some beautiful classical guitars. Are some of those suitable to a finger-style jazz player?*

MG: Absolutely. I do make a concert classical guitar, voiced for concert players. I'm making one this year for a fellow in France who's the protégé of Alexander Lagoya. I'll also modify and voice it for jazz players. There is also my C2, which is a grand concert sized classical guitar. It has a carved back and flat top. There are a few other makers who offer guitars like these, too. A number of people have come to me looking for an archtop, nylon-string guitar. Although I'm sure there are people who are more talented than I am who have had wonderful results with it, I have yet to hear an archtop nylon-string guitar that sounds right.